DESMOND'S DAUGHTER

MAUD DIVER

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THE GREAT AMULET
CANDLES IN THE WIND
LILÁMANI
DESMOND'S DAUGHTER
FAR TO SEEK
COOMBE ST MARY'S
SHIPS OF YOUTH
THE SINGER PASSES

"Cette petite fille, Espérance,
Qui a l'air de rien du tout,
Cette petite fille espérance,
Immortelle. . . .
Comme l'étoile a conduit les Trois Rois du fin fond de l'Orient,
Ainsi, une flamme tremblante,
Elle, seule, conduit les vertus et les mondes."

"Within ourselves we have a hope which always walks in front of our present narrow experience. . . . It will never accept any of our disabilities as a permanent fact; it sets no limit to its own scope; . . . and its wild dreams become true every day."—Sir RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

Desmond's Daughter

BY

MAUD DIVER

AUTHOR OF
'CAPTAIN DESMOND, V.C.,' 'THE GREAT AMULET,'
'THE JUDGMENT OF THE SWORD,' ETC.

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TO HELEN,

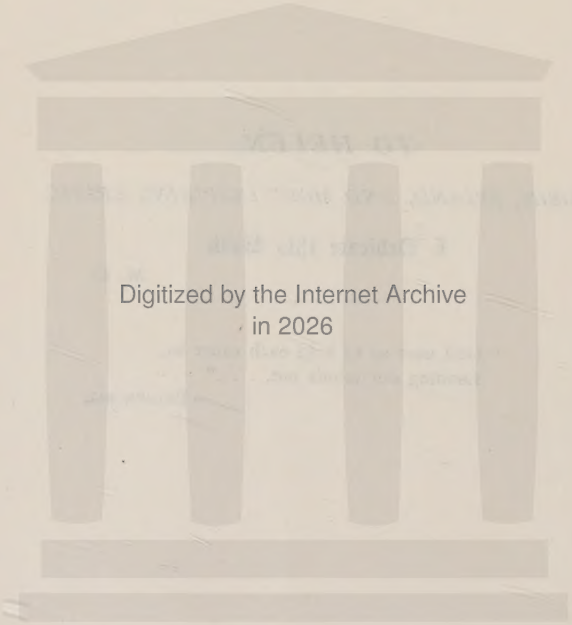
COUSIN, FRIEND, AND MOST INSPIRING CRITIC,

I Dedicate this Book.

M. D.

"God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out. . . ."

— BROWNING.



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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

As my novel includes the true story of the Tirah campaign, it seems advisable to make it clear that all the characters concerned are my own creations, and are in no way derived from those officers whose parts they play. On the other hand, events and incidents are entirely true to fact: including the presence of women and children in Fort Gulistan, the distinction earned by one of the former, and the unique demonstration at the close of the campaign—as all Anglo-Indian readers will know.

I may add that the whole story was conceived, and partially written, before there was any thought of war. Thus, it so happens, that much of the underlying idea of my tale (with which I did not anticipate a very general agreement) is now being daily proven by the facts of life lived under new and stimulating conditions. Already, from the crucible of war, many Vincent Leighs must have emerged and developed in a manner that has probably surprised none more than themselves.

M. D.

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PHASE I.

THE COMING OF VINCENT LEIGH

CHAPTER I.

"Some have tears that well up in the daylight; and others have tears that are hidden in the gloom."—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

VINCENT LEIGH lay full stretch on the April grass; his hands locked behind his head that rested on a tussock of heather. A cloth cap shielded his neck from the scratchings of twigs and the intrusion of adventurous insects that a summer-like spring had wakened to life. All about him the headland was blotched with deep-toned patches of autumn, still dead asleep to the casual observer; but, even so, beautiful exceedingly to this boy with the blood of Scotland and Devon in his veins. To-morrow he would tramp inland and take his fill of the great moor; earth's masterpiece of tapestry, woven of a thousand greys and browns and sombre greens, with the bloom of rose madder permeating all, as it were a whispered promise of glory yet to be.

To-day he was content to lose himself in the blue infinities of sea and sky, to free his spirit from the barrack atmosphere of Sandhurst that had irked him more than ever during this, his second term of military college life.

Only yesterday he had left the hated place and sped thankfully back to his mother's grey stone cottage at Tintagel; to the clean salt breath of the sea and the large draughts of space and silence that were as bread and meat to his soul. Here for a few blessèd weeks he could win freedom from the macadamised track of action and thought, from the faces of men who were too good-natured to resent his aloofness, too far removed from him to understand.

Why should it be only for a few weeks? Why not for ever?

This was the altogether non-regulation question that had visited his heart that morning, when he stood at his window and greeted those two unfailing friends of his childhood, sea and sky. To these he dedicated his first day of freedom. Unbroken solitude —hours and hours of it—was his imperative need; not merely that he might regain the lost poise of his spirit; but that he might take fresh stock of himself, and the situation, with as much honesty as a man, whose future hangs upon the issue, can bring to that delicate task.

Directly after breakfast, he had left the cottage intent upon a day-long tramp that would clear his thoughts and help him to see things plain. Crossing the rough stretch of meadowland that overlooks Bossiney Haven, he had dropped by a footpath into the depths of Rocky Valley, ice-cool at that early hour, and musical with the plash and swirl of rushing water. Over the stream and on up another ribbon of path, he had climbed to the great bluff that sweeps northward to Boscastle Harbour. Rain and thunder in the night had lent a wonderful clarity to the air, a dazzle of brilliance to the turf and even to the grey walls jewelled with living green. Away at the horizon's edge sea and sky were merged in a silver haze; and always, as he went, there travelled with him the heart-stirring wail of gulls and the dull roar of breakers among the rocks four hundred feet below.

The young, loosely-built figure had about it a suggestion of latent power; but the slight droop of the shoulders told its own tale. He had discarded his cap that the wind might thrust its fingers through the thick, dark crop of hair that grew low down into his neck, and gave a noticeably square outline to a forehead broad rather than high, with slightly hollow temples and a well-developed prominence above the brows. There were traces of strain about the mouth that should not have been so firmly scored there at two-and-twenty. The curve of his nostril

was sensitive and proud. The decisive lower lip and chin promised no small measure of self-control. It was the face of one who would suffer unduly from the world's common buffetings, one who would too readily disregard the sound axiom—"Life is not meant to be questioned. It is meant to be lived." And he was in danger of disregarding it now.

Under a typical Cornish wall of slates, set this way and that, he had emptied several packets of sandwiches; and thereafter strolled back across the breezy downs to his favourite headland. Here he had flung himself down to await the pageant in the west before returning to confront his mother—with what?

He had walked himself into a calmer mood. But he had not walked himself out of yesterday's conviction that he could not and would not return to Sandhurst any more. Half ashamed though he felt of such premature surrender, the counter-swing of reaction was strong on this first day of freedom; and he believed — or chose to believe — that the "Army prescription" had been given a fair trial and found wanting. It had simply driven home the old, hampering conviction—rubbed into him at school, and afterwards at Oxford—that he was not as other men. For if Oxford had been difficult, Sandhurst was purgatory. The drill, the uniforms, the unvarying round of duties, the eternal talk of horses and sport and women, had merely thrust him farther into his shell. The very books wore uniforms like the men, and never the ghost of an idea was admitted between their scarlet covers. Already he was beginning to suspect that in losing his last few years of public school life, he had also lost his best chance of battering down the invisible barrier between himself and his kind. In that case nothing remained but to accept the fact like a man and thank God for the two hundred a year that would suffice for his modest needs. Though the fulness of life were denied him, there remained the fulness of work that might yet lead to unimagined heights of achievement.

Blessed conviction of youth that effort and ambition

cannot fail to reach the goal. It is the symbolical bunch of carrots before the donkey's nose. Though the donkey never attain his carrots nor the man his desire, the race has been run, and that is the great matter after all. Already certain shy, secret literary ambitions were stirring in his brain, large and vague, and the more alluring for their vagueness: a big poetic drama on Greek lines; a philosophic review of history; no mere panorama of battles and politics and the deaths of kings, but a living record of causes and character and psychological influences, the hidden forces that evolve the upward-striving spirit of man. Viewed and studied thus, history, by a natural transition, should merge into prophecy; her feet set firmly on the rock of the past, her eyes discerning through the mist of the horizon a Pisgah glimpse of things to be.

So he lay dreaming, while the sun drew gradually away from the rolling uplands of Tintagel. Moment by moment the splendour in the west grew and spread, till the bluff in the foreground loomed like a silhouette of some primeval monster upon a blaze of gold, splashed with one brush-stroke of purple cloud. Already it was twilight in the bay, while yet the high fantastic rocks of Long Island kept their heads in the sun; and sea-gulls, dipping, wheeling, and crying, flashed like streaks of silver across the scarred faces of the cliffs.

The dreamer, lured out of his dream, lay sideways, blinding his eyes and brain with the glory that permeated all things, even his puny, insistent ego, prating of achievement between a sleep and a sleep.

And while the glory lasted Time was not.

A small, chill wind, the first breath of night, brought Vincent back to earth and time, and realisation that it was but April and that warmth had departed with the sun. Springing briskly to his feet, he clapped on his cap, thrust his chilled hands into his pockets, and stood so for a few moments, his eyes resting on the aftermath of sunset, his mind acutely conscious of the significance of his new decision.

In the light of it he saw the highroad ahead of him,

swept clear of action and adventure, of the clash and counter-clash of those volcanic forces that are of the essence of life. He saw the grave, still face of loneliness, and told himself it was the face of peace. Impossible to ignore the suspicion that a man might pay too heavily for the blessing of peace. But in his case it seemed there was no choice. Better, then, the complete eremite than the incomplete man.

Upon that stoical yet questionable conclusion he faced about to take the homeward path; and lo—the moon! There, in the cool grey blue of the eastern sky, she gleamed, a mother-o'-pearl transparency, like some great night-blossoming flower, still half tangled in a blur of trees. An odd thrill shot through him; a slight shock such as one feels who has imagined himself alone and becomes suddenly aware of human eyes regarding him. To all true worshippers of the moon, and Vincent Leigh was one, she is no mere dead world masquerading in a borrowed glory, but the very spirit of night and all that night signifies of peace and mysterious beauty, of apartness from the strenuous traffic of the day. To Vincent she seemed also, at that moment, a symbol of the same loneliness and peace that were to be his portion in exchange for the dust of the arena.

Spellbound he stood and watched her slow, exquisite change from transparency to radiance, the magic transfiguration of the sleeping earth. Then he strolled on towards home and his mother, and all that must somehow be made clear to her during the evening.

Straight there sprang the question, how would she receive it all? For the life of him he could not tell. Yet these two were in as close accord as they of the silent clan may achieve. But, silent or no, it is a common experience, a standing proof of the soul's essential isolation, that there, where love and understanding seem deepest, a man may yet stand confronted with bewildering uncertainty in the hour of crisis, that is the hour of his supremest need.

CHAPTER II.

"Life is stronger than a single soul."
—CORNELIA SORABJI.

To passers-by along the Boscastle road, Greystones showed a more individual aspect than any of its neighbours round about. Its deep slate roof, jewelled with lichen and moss, shadowed two miniature windows dating from the dark ages; and for porch two vertical slabs of slate were set upon either side of the door, with a third slab laid across the top. Here began the rough wall bounding the garden that looked across an open stretch of cornfield and headland to the sea: and here Greystones of the dark ages merged into Greystones of the nineteenth century, with windows of reasonable size, and half a second storey that increased the long queer slope of the roof towards the road.

To-night, near the slate porch, Vincent paused bracing himself for the thing he must say; and while he paused, there came to him through an open window the sound of his mother's voice alternating with deep, deliberate tones quite unknown to him.

Visitors at the cottage were rare at any time: and a man—at this hour! His first sensation was rage against the intruder: his first instinct flight. But it was late. She might be growing anxious; and he himself was certainly growing curious——

In the dusk of the tiny hall he charged against Jenny,—the devoted but captious commander-in-chief of the cottage; brushed aside her reproaches, and,

with a sensible flutter of curiosity, opened the drawing-room door.

Mrs Leigh, a slender, shapely woman, of deliberate movement, met him on his entrance and took him by the arm. "I was beginning to wonder where you had got to, my son," she said, and he detected a faint note of eagerness in her tone. "This is Colonel Wyndham. A very old friend indeed."

"Almost an antediluvian survival!" chimed in the deep-voiced stranger,—a tall grey-headed man, who now came forward and shook hands.

Vincent, uncommunicative at best, had no trite remark at his command; and the mellow voice went on: "I'm not very long retired; and my doctor sent me down here to recruit after a go of Indian fever. The look of this cottage caught my fancy, and when they told me the name of the owner, I couldn't resist looking in to find out if I had been quite forgotten! I haven't, it seems, and here have your mother and I been peopling the twilight with ghosts of more than thirty years ago. You're just back from Sandhurst, she tells me. Very thankful to get out of harness for a few weeks, no doubt?"

"More thankful than I can say," Vincent replied with such unusual fervour that his mother glanced at him in faint surprise.

The boy, aware of her glance, tingled with sudden, acute self-consciousness, fell back on monosyllables, and made haste to be gone.

But that unexpected hint of sympathy in the stranger's question went far to modify his antagonism and quicken his interest in the talk during dinner, which he made small attempt to share:—talk of the past, of England and India, and more especially of one Sir Theo Desmond, Wyndham's friend and fellow-soldier, now commanding a Division, and likely before long to command all India.

While they talked, Vincent had leisure to observe and speculate upon the new-comer whose appearance had brought that wistful eagerness into his mother's

tone. Paul Wyndham's face was of the type that improves with age. Always it had possessed a certain quality that is to good looks as sunlight to a candle; and now to that quality was added the subtle impress of a life straightly and strongly lived.

So thought Margaret Leigh as she listened to his talk of the past; now frankly regarding the retired Colonel; now hearing only the voice of a certain subaltern, that had made music in the heart of a certain Margaret Donaldson some thirty years ago.

Vincent, in his ignorance and young resentment at the frustration of his private plans, merely felt rather more outside things than usual; he that had imagined an evening of barriers flung down, an evening that should prove a turning-point in his future. He blessed his mother when, on rising, she proposed coffee and cigars in the drawing-room; and, upon the first plausible pretext, escaped to the long low room upstairs that served him for bedroom and study in one.

There, undisturbed by superfluous humans, he could surrender himself to the unfailing companionship of his books; the only real friends he had made at Oxford; the only friends he seemed capable of making, there or elsewhere. From the manifold life of that great University, he had been debarred by the curse of his unconquerable shyness, that belied his true nature at every turn. At first he had made spasmodic efforts to mix freely with his fellows; but the result had proved utterly disproportionate to the strain involved; and by the end of his third year he had been forced to recognise that the disability inherited from his mother was no mere surface defect of youth, but a permanent item of his outfit for life. Happily for himself, his mother's complex nature was leavened in him by the spirit of his soldier father, dead these eleven years; the father whose reiterate plea had been: "For God's sake, let me put the boy into the Army and make a man of him."

Vincent had never forgotten the first time he heard those words through an open window, on a still, grey

morning of summer, or the stress on the word 'man,' implying he knew not what, that had made him feel vaguely ashamed. What was wrong in him, he had wondered ruefully, that he could not become a man without being forcibly 'made' into one? Was it his 'onlyness'? And was he really so different from other boys? Or was every one 'different' without knowing it?

Two years at a public school had hammered the answer into him painfully enough. There he had discovered the gulf fixed between the 'difference' that was permissible and the excess of difference that was the unforgivable sin. Great therefore was his relief when, at his father's death, his mother, in her loneliness, had compromised matters by engaging a private tutor.

More than once, before Colonel Leigh died, he had repeated the wish of his heart in his son's hearing; and his urgency had left so deep an impression on that son, that when the moment for decision came, he had chosen the Army, in the desperate hope that by living and working in communion with his kind, he might eventually break down the barrier between himself and them.

His mother had applauded his choice without marked enthusiasm. Secretly she had hoped that the University atmosphere might lure his ambition into some other channel: and, in a measure, it was so. There could be no denying the strength of the counter-pull, when he found himself with second-class honours in history to his credit and a collection of thoughtful essays that had attracted the attention of dons. Whether that counter-pull was a temptation to be resisted, or a call to be obeyed—there was the rub: and only after a period of painful swaying had the spirit of his father carried the day. Since University commissions were not then given direct, he had set his teeth and gone on to Sandhurst; while his very few intimates shook their heads over him, with pessimistic allusions to square pegs and round holes.

Now, on this critical evening of April, after further

heart-searching, he had arrived at the definite conclusion that they were right and his father wrong: and there could be no rest till he had imparted the great discovery to his mother.

When would that intrusive stranger stop talking futilities and give him, Vincent, a chance to talk of the things that mattered? The impulse to impart his thoughts was so rare with him, that it was the more maddening to be baulked by a mere outsider, who wanted to sentimentalise over old times.

And in the room below him the mere outsider sat silent after he had gone, while Margaret Leigh braced herself to the effort of more intimate speech with this friend who had stepped back into her life as quietly as he had slipped out of it years and years ago.

"You see how he is," she said at last. "Very nearly as bad as—I was at his age. What *will* a boy like that do in the Army?"

"He will suffer." Colonel Wyndham spoke steadily, after a perceptible pause. "And he will learn a vast amount that no books would ever teach him. And he will be very glad to have learnt it all—afterwards. I venture to prophesy that the Army will do a great deal for that boy. I suspect a strong strain of his father in him, that may prove to be his salvation."

She smiled her slow sad smile.

"Poor dear! He stands badly in need of salvation from the Donaldson curse. The word is hardly too strong——"

"Yet that very curse, bravely handled, may prove a birthright worth a score of obvious blessings."

At that she faced him frankly, and her smile was not sad any more.

"*You* haven't changed very much," she said. "And it heartens one to believe you may be right."

"I sincerely hope I am. Personally, I would advise India; if possible, the Frontier——"

She winced visibly.

"Am I counselling things too hard for you?" he

asked, and again the note of sympathy that had attracted Vincent sounded in his voice. "Has he never thought of India himself?"

"I don't know. We have never discussed things—in detail. He is very reserved, even with me." She broke off with lips compressed and a tightening of her clasped hands.

"You would not be entirely against it?" he urged with the utmost gentleness.

"No—not if it would really be best for him."

Thus tacitly encouraged he enlarged on the value of Frontier service, on its drawbacks and attractions, and of Desmond's influence in high quarters, that he would assuredly be glad to use for the son of an old friend.

It was after ten when he rose to go; and in the firmness of his hand-clasp she felt the deep understanding that could not be spoken between two who were neither strangers nor intimate friends.

He merely said: "I am afraid I must have seemed rather cruel"—and she, after a second's hesitation: "N-no. It is only—I begin to see how many many mistakes I have made; and I believe you have been 'sent' to save me from making the last and worst one of all. I wish you could have a talk with him."

"Nothing I should like better. I thought of taking a boat out from Boscastle to-morrow afternoon. If he'd care to come with me, I should be delighted."

"How good of you! I'll call him——"

"No, no. Don't bother him. I'll look in on the chance as I go by."

"Why not come to lunch?"

"Thanks very much, I will."

So they parted; and Margaret Leigh went back to her empty drawing-room, stirred and perturbed within herself as she had not been for years.

Would Vincent come out of his shell now, she wondered, half longing for another sight of him, half dreading the effort of further talk on a subject that

made parting—and such a parting!—a mere matter of months.

A vision of the garden through the uncurtained French window lured her out. The night was astonishingly still for April. All open spaces were pools of moonshine. In the midst of them, bushes and borders made islands of shadow, and over all was diffused the pearl-grey twilight which miraculously softens and transforms the commonest features of earth.

Margaret Leigh stepping out into it, stepped straightway back into the past, that had so suddenly and so strangely reawakened within her.

CHAPTER III.

"Neither this world, nor the next, nor happiness is for him whose self is full of misgiving."—*Bhagavadgita.*

"MOTHER — Mother!" His voice coming down through the dark brought her back from the pangs of 'then' to the pangs of 'now.'

She stood still right under his window looking up. "What is it, my son?" she asked; and for her those words were the supreme term of endearment.

"Are you too sleepy for a talk?"

"No. Come down, dear, I was hoping you would."

He came accordingly, down and out into the moonlight; linked his arm through hers, and led her slowly up the whole length of the garden. But even in the dark he found it difficult to begin. All his prepared speeches and arguments had fallen into disarray, and they reached their own low boundary wall without a word spoken between them.

Then suddenly Vincent detached himself from his mother, thrust both hands into his pockets, and spoke with a decision that was the outcome of a determined effort rather than unshakeable resolve.

"Look here, Mother, I don't know what that man had to say. There seemed a good deal of it. And I suppose he thought me an ill-mannered lout bolting off like that. But *I* came home with a good deal to say too; and I felt I couldn't sleep till I'd said it."

Once started, the words came with astonishing ease; not those he had planned, but others, more effective because more simple and direct.

"Mother, it's no earthly use fighting against the way we're made. I'm sick of knocking my head against a stone wall. So I'm not going back to Sandhurst, and I'm not going into the Army."

"My dear——!" She murmured on a sharply indrawn breath that might indicate either relief or dismay.

"It's not a sudden notion," he went on in a quieter vein. "It's been there all along. But you see, I wanted—to be a man as my father understood the word; and it seemed poor-spirited not to make a fight for it. But it's no good. There seems to be a fundamental antagonism barring the way. I went off this morning—to worry things out. And this is the result."

He paused, regarding the familiar outline of her profile—the long nose, the gentle, close-set lips, the hair that grew squarely on her forehead like his own. She stood there looking away from him into the dim, unfathomable distance, and he could not guess at the struggle within.

Accustomed to her odd silences, he never found them disconcerting. "It's not exactly pleasant to own oneself beaten," he explained, addressing that enigmatic yet obviously attentive profile. "But there's one consolation. I needn't leave *you* yet awhile."

At that she turned on him a strange, incredulous smile; and he led her back, detailing, in broken phrases, the ambitions and possibilities that had not yet taken clear shape in his own mind.

Outside the French window, in a panel of lamplight, they stood still again; and Mrs Leigh let out her breath in a slow sigh.

"What is it, Mother?" the boy asked with a tender pressure of her arm. "Are you disappointed or—relieved?"

She turned and looked at him steadily. "My dear, I am thanking God that you should have said these things to-night, and not any sooner."

"Why?"

"Because if you had spoken sooner, I believe I should have agreed. To-night—I can't."

"But why to-night?" He slipped his hand from her arm, and a touch of sharpness invaded his tone. "Is it on account of that man? What earthly right has *he* to interfere?"

"It is not a question of interference," she answered quietly. "Vincent, I have a good deal to say about—all this. I have wished often I could speak to you more freely of my difficulties that are also your own. And to-night something in me has been unlocked. To-night I *can* speak; and I believe it is good that you should hear. For I can't have you own yourself beaten at the start, my son. The only chance for those cursed with a shyness like ours is to fight it ruthlessly and fight it young. Otherwise we fatally lose touch with life. Our rather grey and unheroic tragedy is not even remotely understood by the many. But mercifully we can sometimes help each other when we seem powerless to help ourselves."

The even quiet of her voice was more impressive than any show of emotion. Vincent stood before her amazed, interested and deeply moved. The barriers were down, indeed!

Then he, too, found his tongue. "But, Mother—tell me, honestly, isn't it simply a case of beating the air? Didn't *you* fight it ruthlessly and fight it young?"

"It is just about those early struggles and mistakes that I must tell you, Vincent. Come in, dear. It's late; but we must take our opportunities when we can."

So they passed out of the night and its vastness into the closer intimacy of the softly lit room. There—sitting in her accustomed chair, with the boy on a stool beside her knee—she told him of a certain summer endless years ago; of a gauche, lanky girl of thirteen and a certain Sandhurst cadet who was often at her father's house with a handsome boy-friend three years his junior. ("Sir Theo, whom you heard us talk of," she explained.) There was also her own elder sister;

and throughout that summer those four had enjoyed the happy casual intimacy of youth.

But with the autumn came changes. Young Desmond joined his friend at Sandhurst and the Donaldsons moved elsewhere.

"After that," the low, even voice went on, "I did not see the two boys again for nine years,—not boys any more, by that time, but Frontier Cavalry officers, home on their first long leave. We met at old General Desmond's, the four of us, and picked up the threads of our old friendship. Then . . . they went back to their regiment and"—she paused for a perceptible moment, but Vincent made no move—"soon after, there came the one chance that might just have saved me from myself, as I want you to be saved, before it is too late."

At that, Vincent looked up quickly. "Are you quite sure," he asked, with his whimsical lift of one eyebrow, "that it wasn't too late—an hour after I was born?"

"I am very sure," she answered steadily.

"Hope you're right," said he in a tone implying 'I fear you're wrong.' "But what *was* your chance, Mother?"

"India."

"India!" The suppressed eagerness in his tone showed her that she had touched a hidden spring.

"Have you ever thought of it, Vincent, on your own account?"

"Well, naturally . . . it's occurred to me." He had himself in hand now. "I've read and thought a good deal about India—her philosophy and religions. Just the fringe of a huge subject. But Indian soldiering—it's a far cry, isn't it? Besides—there is *you!*"

"No, my dear. In this matter there is only—you! Colonel Wyndham strongly advocates Indian service for you; and he would not speak so decisively at random. He wants a talk with you about it all. He is coming to lunch, and hopes you will go out to Boscastle with him for the afternoon."

Vincent frowned. "Plucky man! I'm afraid he'll find me poor company. I'll hear what he has to say, Mother. But I must reserve my own judgment. Naturally the notion of India does make a difference; —a new country, new people, a new language. Something big to tackle outside musketry and drill. And it's not as if I really thought of sticking to the Service."

He sat quiet a moment, surveying a future diametrically opposed to the one he had mentally accepted a few hours earlier. Then he turned to her with eagerness unfeigned.

"But *your* chance, Mother. Why did you throw it away?"

Her smile had its odd unwilling quality, as if smiling were something of an effort; and perhaps it was.

"Why does one ever do foolish things? I wonder! And perhaps it was not so foolish after all, since it gave me you. *My* chance came in the shape of my mother's sister, wife of a Staff Corps colonel: a lively loveable creature, with no child of her own. She seemed to see the way I was drifting more clearly than my own mother did; and she begged the loan of me for three years. In that time she undertook to cure me of my shyness and provide me with a husband! A rather alarming programme! But I believe she would have carried it through; and there was wisdom in the idea. But I was so miserable just then that I had not the wit to see it. And I wanted no husband of her providing. But I am wearying you with all this, my boy."

"No—no. Go on." His low tone was urgent. "You refused?"

"Yes. I was young. I thought there would be plenty of other chances. But none such ever came my way again. Within a year my sister married and my mother died. My father, quite heart-broken, retired to a small house he had bought on the edge of Dartmoor—and I went with him. For seven years he was almost my only companion. Strangers irked him, and I had always been slow to make friends. Yet I

was not unhappy—then. I had books and music and the moor. I began to fall in love with solitude. Brick by brick, through those uneventful years, I was building up unseen walls that nothing could altogether break down. I only began to realize this when—your father came into my life. He was stationed at Plymouth. I was staying there with a cousin, who insisted on occasional visits and threatened me with premature crystallization, all with the best intentions Well, there your father found me—and claimed me. For a time I resisted. In my own heart no flame leaped up. But—it is difficult to talk of such things. Your father was urgent; and at last, in response, there came a very real warmth and glow; a blessed sense that I was necessary to some one else's happiness. No *man* can quite understand what that means to a woman, Vincent. Yet still I was afraid—for him. Too late the truth came home to me that those peaceful years of semi-isolation had been my undoing. I said so to your father. But he believed he could change all that. I knew he could not; though, indeed, I made a fight for it. I did my wretched best. As for him—no man ever tried harder to achieve the impossible. But his strong impetuous nature could not even understand the root of my difficulty. His failure to save me from myself was the hidden tragedy of our married life: and in the end he left the Army—on my account, before his time was up."

She broke off there and they fell silent. The boy—deeply impressed by her revelation, and acutely aware of the effort it must have cost—could only put his free hand over hers and grip it hard; and she, stooping, kissed his head.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed twelve clear strokes, and with a start she rose, drawing him up to his feet. "Midnight!" she sighed, and stood a moment regarding him. Then: "For your own sake,—and mine, Vincent," she said at last, "take hold of life with both hands. Get to grips with it, while there is

still time. Too often, I know, I have hindered you where I should have helped. And to-night has been my poor attempt at reparation."

"Mother!" Vincent's low cry came from the depths, that had been so strangely, so profoundly stirred. It was all he could say: but putting his arms round her, he held her close and long.

CHAPTER IV.

"The true test of manhood is not 'I think, therefore I am,' but 'I act, therefore I am.'"—WESTMACOTT.

IN the bows of an old fishing tub, off Boscastle, Colonel Wyndham and Vincent Leigh lounged smoking and talking very much at their ease. Near the stern sat the owner of the tub—red-brown as a weathered brick—leisurely dipping his oars into a silken sea that took on iridescent changes of light and colour and was nowhere crested with foam. There, cradled in the heart of peace, their talk was of war, of India's inhospitable Borderland, of the recurring clash between races and religions, between classes and individuals, that is at once the source of all human tragedy and of all human progress.

The walk out to Boscastle had not seemed promising. There had been gaps of silence difficult to break. In the first place, half a lifetime lay between them, and, furthermore, each was hampered by a sense of hidden knowledge underlying their surface strangeness. But when, at length, their tongues were loosed, Vincent had found his unreasoning antagonism steadily undermined. Thoughtful beyond his years, he could not but appreciate the older man's breadth and mellowness, the large understanding of middle age, the evidences of genuine thought and wide reading, which he had deemed incompatible with a life of soldiering.

Some hint of this, cautiously worded, Vincent let fall while their nutshell floated on and out, a mere speck between the dappled blue above and the shimmer-

ing blue beneath; and Colonel Wyndham smiled, not as one who condoned a childish impertinence, but as one who remembered and understood.

"I felt much the same when I first went to Sandhurst," he said. "It was love of a friend, not love of the Army, that made a soldier of me. Radically I was no better suited to the life than you are; which is my only excuse for boring you with talk of myself——"

Vincent muttered a half-articulate disclaimer; and the older man went on: "Well, out there I learnt, among other things, that it takes almost as many sorts of men to make an army as to make a world. I learnt, as you will, that the officers of a regiment do occasionally get a little way beyond red books and promotion, pipe-clay and parades. And, after all, my dear boy, you would find the grind of routine, the dominion of trifles and petty jealousies, in every profession under the sun. But there is always—even in the Army—the deeper significance, the larger view; and in your case, it might just save you——"

"That is how my mother feels about it," the boy admitted under his breath.

"She is amazingly right and wise. She has a Spartan courage that you might do worse than emulate. She tells me you've a strong leaning towards literary work, which is all to the good. Personally, I see no reason why you should not achieve something in that line and yet not grudge your country a few years of soldier service. You're not cut out for regimental life, I admit; and you won't enjoy it—at first. But it will probably grow on you. And at least it will give you a taste of action, co-operation, responsibility, and a few other trifles essential to good work of any kind. When all's said, the military virtues are the bed-rock virtues. And if you have the sense to give soldiering a fair trial, you will find that it makes larger all-round demands on a man's life and character than it is supposed to do by those who know precious little about it. If you've the luck to come in for a taste of the real thing, so much the better for you!"

Vincent sat silent a moment, considering that la
then he looked squarely into the older man's ey
"If I could only be sure——" he hesitated. "I su
pose you've done a good deal of fighting yourself
he asked.

"A fair amount, here and there. Why?"

"Didn't—something inside you always shrink,
ways rebel at the hideousness—the brutality?"

"Yes. Always."

"And yet—you uphold war?"

"Yes. As a last resort, I uphold war," Colo
Wyndham answered with his grave smile. "I
sounds paradoxical; but war *is* the great paradox,
greatest in human history. It spells horror; bu
also spells heroism, which is possibly what comme
it to most healthy-minded men."

"All the same—in these enlightened days," Vinc
said slowly, "the knock-down blow begins to se
rather an antiquated and elemental form of argume
for reasoning beings."

Colonel Wyndham's smile deepened.

"Quite so. I said 'as a last resort'; and happ
most of us are still *un*reasoning beings over thc
essential things about which men and nations figh
As for the elemental, a dash of that's the very to
we're needing these days. Strikes one very forcib
after an absence of nearly five years. The troub
with your modern over-educated man is his tenden
to forget that all his reading and talking and thinki
is of precious little value unless it stimulates to fir
action."

"And 'peace on earth' is only a visionar
dream?"

"Permanent peace—certainly. A world withc
conflict is a contradiction in terms. It is mer
a question of which form you choose to upho
Actual war seems the more horrible, because it c
centrates into a given space and time tragedies th
are going on everywhere and always, unrealised, e
cept by the sufferers or those who work in great citi

Call it which you like, a terrible medicine or an intermittent eruption of evil; it is still, with all its horror and wastefulness, the Great Flail that threshes the wheat from the chaff. So, in the long-run, it makes for the ethical advance of the race. You probably don't agree? And of course I speak as an old fogey nearly forty years ahead of you in age, which I suppose means forty years behind you in other respects!"

Vincent laughed. "*I* don't see it that way, sir."

"Glad to hear it. But I didn't bring you out and box you up in a boat in order to thrust my antiquated views of the universe down your throat!"

As the sun dipped westward, in unclouded glory, they made their way to the landlocked haven of Boscastle Harbour; dined early at the hotel and strolled home under the rising moon, by a footpath well known to Vincent, whose antagonism was by this time clean gone. Darkness, silvered by moonlight, was not without its influence on both. Their talk slipped again into deeper waters. They discovered a mutual inclination for the philosophic view of life, and fell to battering the age-old problems of whence and whither, of personality, fate, and free-will. Wyndham's reading, though wide, had been quite unsystematic. The Anglo-Indian cannot accumulate books. Vincent had dug deep in certain regions and had left others untouched. Instinctively he had turned for companionship and sustenance to the pessimists, the Cynics and Stoics, whose principles encouraged contempt for consolations that he had grown to believe would never be his.

But the man, having run his race in defiance of handicaps, stood upon the higher ground of affirmation—affirmation of choice, will, freedom, and all that makes for the impulse of valiant striving, as against tame acceptance of the inevitable.

It was a favourite theme; more than that, it was the backbone of Wyndham's religious and philosophic faith, this belief in the deep reality of human choice and endeavour, that have, between them, made the

world what it is, and have evolved the very philosophies that deny their existence.

A man's convictions are, as a rule, the last things he will talk about; but the mood and the hour were congenial, and Wyndham felt strongly drawn towards the boy who stood on the threshold of life hampered by a withering conviction that the dice were loaded, the end fore-ordained.

Vincent Leigh listened, at first, with the hypercritical deference of youth for the dictums of middle age, and with a spice of the pessimist's instinctive distrust of all fair-sounding arguments; but, as the mellow, masculine voice went on, there came a change in the colour of his mood. To-night these things, quietly spoken, had upon him almost the effect of a trumpet call to battle; and as his shy, reluctant spirit stirred in response, he found himself impelled to such frank confession of the fact as pride would permit and his halting tongue could achieve.

The effort of screwing up his courage took time; but once the first stumbling sentences were out, the ordeal was as nothing to the unexpected sense of relief. Never before had he talked openly of the enemy; and the mere doing so robbed him of half his terror. It was a relief to discover how little need be said; how swiftly and completely this comparative stranger understood.

To Vincent it seemed that they reached the slate porch far too soon.

"Won't you come in, sir?" he asked, and there was that in his tone that warmed the older man's heart.

"I think not, thanks," he said kindly. "We might disturb your mother, and you'd really be better in bed." He held out his hand. "We're not strangers any more, and that's all to the good. I feel years younger since yesterday." The boy had no answer ready. He could only grasp the proffered hand. "And is it going to be the Army—after all that?"

Wyndham asked, "Or have you still a lot more thinking to do?"

"N-no. I believe I've done too much of that already. It's paralyzing. It makes — things get on one's nerves. Perhaps—I'm a coward: but it seems to me that, beyond a certain point, life simply doesn't bear thinking about——"

"Try living it for a change. You'll find it a wholesomer, pleasanter prescription for yourself and others."

CHAPTER V.

"I must keep a steady helm
By the star I cannot see."
—HERBERT TRENCH.

HE was up and out, at an early hour, tramping hatless down the path that dips steeply to Bossiney Cove.

The world seemed new-created on this radiant morning, and the boy—breasting its spacious emptiness, with a towel over his shoulder—knew that to-day there was no more need for thinking. The hour was conducive rather to high hope and high resolve, to the forward looking visions of youth that have a bravery and a pathos peculiarly their own.

Down there in the Cove, it was not yet morning. The narrow inlet of water lay still and limpid, among rugged masses of rock, like an aquamarine set in ebony. Yet no aquamarine ever gleamed with quite that intensity of colour as of emeralds and turquoises melted into one.

On a slab, well placed for diving, Vincent stripped, shivering, yet rejoicing in the sting of cold. Above him the great cliff struck upward, like a menace. Beneath him rocks and sand, lightly swaying weeds and bright fish darting among them, like arrows of light, showed clear as in a mirror. And into the midst of them he dived.

It was far too early for bathing, though March and April had borrowed the robes of June. But he wel-

comed the icy shock of the water as he had welcomed the preliminary shiver. Both were in tune with the spring and with his own Spartan mood. He had chosen the stony path of courage; and this was his baptism.

It could only be a plunge and a few vigorous side-strokes out of the Cove and back. But while it lasted body and spirit revelled in an ecstatic sense of unity with sea and sky and the glory of the morning. In the crystalline water every movement of his limbs was revealed. But for the soft yet strong resistance of the Atlantic it was as if he swam through air, free as the gulls that sailed above his head.

All too soon he was back on the rock, rubbing his body till it tingled again. Then flinging on his clothes, he took the upward path at a steady trot and emerged into full sunlight on the high level of the down. There he stood awhile looking seaward, his heart filled with a confused, irresistible impulse of worship, an instinctive reaching out to that 'Brilliance at the core of brilliance' which is the quickening spirit of prayer. More than that he could not achieve: but it served to strengthen his new resolve and to send him rejoicing on his way.

He covered the remaining distance at a brisk trot, and entered the dining-room, with glowing face and damp dishevelled hair, just as his mother had blown out the spirit-lamp under her urn.

At sight of him her grey eyes lightened, and he kissed her twice without a word.

"Boy, it's much too early for bathing," she rebuked him, smiling. "But you look transfigured!"

"I feel transfigured. Something like Moses must have felt when he came down from the mountain." He helped himself in speaking, ate a few mouthfuls and emptied his cup, while she filled her own and awaited further revelation.

Very soon it came.

"Mother—my mind is made up once for all. No more talk of turning my back on Sandhurst. I must

just go ahead; and if I prove an utter failure, at least I shall feel I have done my best."

It was no less than she had expected: but her glow of pride was chilled by a keen realisation of the price she must pay for his victory.

"That's a brave resolve, Vincent," she said quietly, and added under her breath: "God bless you."

"I think it ought to be 'God bless Colonel Wyndham!'" he retorted, instinctively sheering away from the danger zone of emotion. "He's a genuine brick; the biggest in creation."

"Yes. I am very grateful to Colonel Wyndham," she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "I knew he would help you—to see things."

Then, further speech being difficult, she unobtrusively changed the subject.

It was the turning-point. If secret qualms still visited the boy's heart, he never spoke of them either to his mother or to Wyndham, who, by the end of the vacation, had become tacitly accepted as a third member of the household.

His health, it seemed, needed a deal of recruiting, or perhaps he had simply forgotten that it needed recruiting at all. They are hard years, for a man not prematurely aged, those first years of being inexorably set aside to make room for the onward-surging mass of younger men, hungry for their own share of achievement, for their own brief 'place in the sun'; and to Paul Wyndham it seemed a gift from God, this chance discovery of an old friend and a new interest; an interest peculiarly welcome to one who would have given the world for a son of his own.

Together they tramped or rode over the moorland and the downs, that incongruous pair—the man who had run his race, the boy with all his triumphs and pitfalls before him. Wyndham undertook to coach him in the language, to make arrangements for his outfit, and to ensure for him the hard, priceless privilege of Frontier service after his preliminary spell in a British regiment. Perhaps only a woman left deso-

late, after years of marriage, knows quite what it means to have a man step back into her life; to feel the guiding, protecting hand again upon the helm. And it was all done so simply and unobtrusively, with what his brother officers used to call 'the Wyndham touch,' that could not but go straight to the heart of Margaret Leigh and her son.

Jenny alone disapproved, and that openly, of these quite irregular 'goings on.' That a mere stranger should be allowed to pass in and out as if the house were his own, and to make hay, unimpugned, with the sacred weekly books—she wouldn't have believed it, not if Isaiah himself had come down, in wings, to prophesy the astounding fact! One secret consolation upheld her. When 'holidays' were over, and Mr Vincent back at 'school,' that Colonel-man surely couldn't 'have the face' to stay on; and strong in that hope she continued to endure.

In May, Vincent returned to Sandhurst—and disillusion. Though he went back with courage renewed and the edge of intolerance blunted, he found himself no nearer to the spirit of the college than before. One only ray of genuine fellowship lightened that last term. Through Wyndham he achieved fuller knowledge of Wyndham's godson, Paul Desmond—a handsome, strapping boy of nineteen, whom he had formerly admired, afar off, and dismissed as "the regular Army type." Young Desmond's enthusiasm for the Border proved infectious as it was tonic; and a mutual faith in Wyndham linked the boys closer still.

Meanwhile, away at Tintagel, the egregious 'Colonel-man' had the 'face' to stay on; and though he came less often to Greystones, his visits were still too frequent to suit Jenny Baxter's jealousy or her bristling sense of propriety. To this last, neither Margaret Leigh nor Wyndham gave a thought; and no worldly eyes were on them to make them unduly conscious of the fact that they were more and more often together as the summer wore on.

Once Wyndham went to stay with a friend near

Sandhurst, and once again, for a fortnight, to Mavins, the Merediths' place in Surrey, where more young Desmonds—two daughters and three sons—spent part of the year with their mother's brother, Sir Howard Meredith, G.C.B.; and on both occasions he was surprised at the alacrity with which he returned to his lonely room at the King's Arms Hotel.

It was about this time that he deliberately asked himself one evening: "Why not——?" And heard, not without a pang, the whisper of his heart: "Impossible!"

For there, imperishably enshrined, was the radiant image of a girl who had never grown up — Honor Meredith, as he had first seen her in the old days at Kohat. By some mysterious process, such as only a lover could achieve, he had succeeded in cherishing his sublimated passion for that girl, while honestly accepting the friendship of Honor Desmond, the still radiant woman, now queening it over Rawal Pindi and Theo's household.

But there remained, none the less, his undeniable gravitation toward this lonely woman, whose real need of him he now began to divine, for all his own modesty and her innate reserve. No question now of youth's imperative desire to possess; but he could, and increasingly did, feel for her the large, protective tenderness of manhood at its best. Was that, he wondered in his ignorance, enough to offer a woman as proud as she was lonely? And was he genuinely anxious to offer it? On the whole, he found her friendship so dear and pleasant a possession, that he felt in no hurry for doubtful developments. "Afterwards—perhaps," he said in his heart; and turned his steps in the usual direction.

As for Margaret Leigh—absorbed in her son, she had accepted Paul Wyndham's re-entrance into her life with a glow of quiet satisfaction; a glow that, week by week, had deepened and intensified till it needed but a word, a breath, to set it aflame. She had so confidently believed herself too old for 'that sort of

thing.' And now, of a sudden, she found herself wondering—

It was his return, after the second absence, that had flashed the truth upon her. He had come back full of Desmond's children, especially of Thea, a lovely child, just turned seventeen, who was to join her parents at Pindi in a year's time. And Margaret Leigh had listened to it all with a queer dizzying emotion that had no concern at all with Sir Theo's boys and girls. By reason of this her manner had been more repressed than usual; so that Wyndham had reproached himself for boring her, and had gone home puzzled and a little dismayed.

From that day the nature of their friendship suffered a perceptible change. They talked less readily of themselves. There were times when they found it hard to talk at all. There was a troubled fascination when their eyes met—and nothing was said. But before they realised it, summer was more than half over; and here was Vincent back again to divert their thoughts into a dozen other channels.

For now the shadow of parting obliterated every other thought from the mother's heart. Vain to tell herself that this was the common lot of woman; that every day, somewhere, some mother was enduring the pang toward which the whole creation moves. The joy and pain that comes to each one of us is never quite like anything that has come to others before, in our own estimation at least.

They were grateful, all three of them, for the temporary obsession of clothes. There seemed no end to the number of coats and boots a 2nd Lieutenant of Her Majesty's Army was required to possess; to say nothing of caps and a helmet, a revolver and a sword.

The two men spent a strenuous week in London, and soon the cottage at Tintagel began to be filled with the fruits of their labours; with bags and trunks and cases that flauntingly announced themselves the property of 2nd Lieutenant V. A. Leigh. And beneath

his name stood that of his father's British regiment, the battalion serving in India.

To the two women it seemed as if they could hardly stir a foot without stumbling over one or other of these superfluous reminders. Jenny, good soul, christened most of them with her tears; but the tears of Margaret Leigh fell only on her pillow, and that not often. Her stoicism and courage were more than skin deep; and she had need of both to carry her through the ordeal of the last weeks, the last days, the last day, when hours and even minutes were like fine gold.

On the morning of that day Vincent rose at dawn, slipped out of the house, and betook himself to the glen of the great waterfall known as St Nectan's Kieve.

Here, according to legend, St Nectan dwelt in his hermitage, beside the chapel with the silver bell; and here, it is said, came Arthur's Knights to kneel upon the slab beside the waterfall, and receive the old man's blessing before adventuring upon the quests of chivalry or vision that were the order of their day. Now, after the lapse of centuries, there kneeled upon the same stone yet another knight, with none of their outer trappings and little of their inner exaltation: a knight self-dedicated to a quest of more than doubtful issue.

To-day that doubt hung like a fog about his heart, contracted already with the pain of parting and the dread of strange people in crowds that had been his most hampering weakness from a boy.

Bareheaded, he knelt in the dew-drenched twilight of early morning with the brave music of falling water in his ears, and in his soul the braver music of renewed resolve. Poet as he was by temperament, and sensitized to receive life's finer impressions, the hour had its message for him in response to his dumb appeal. The chill pressure of the stone against his knees counselled hardness; and, as he knelt on, some measure of the strength that upheld those far-off worshippers seemed to flow into his veins. Fantasy or no, the effect upon himself was undeniable: and now as light increased and the stillness within him deepened, that

Greater Stillness—which is above and beneath and around all things—did, in some wordless, exquisite fashion, speak comfort to his heart.

That night he sat alone with his mother on the low stool beside her, his arm resting on her knee; and they forced themselves to speak in some detail of the days to come,—a subject tacitly avoided during those last weeks. And they laid unwonted stress on trivial things, because the things that could not be spoken clamoured within.

Early next morning he would start for Southampton with Colonel Wyndham. Though she had the strength to bid him go, she lacked the strength to stand alone upon the edge of England and watch the inexorable steamer dwindle to a speck between sea and sky. Vincent was thankful for this, but he did not say so. He dilated instead on all that he owed to the man who, for months, had made their life his own.

"Seems queer to think how hotly I resented him that first evening; and now—see what a godsend he's been to me. He'll go on being a godsend to you, won't he, when I'm gone?"

"I rather suspect," she said, evading the direct question, "that it's been his chief *rôle* in life. I am so very glad that you two should have met and become friends in spite of all the years between."

"Yes. It's been a stunning bit of luck for me."

Silence again; and her next remark, when it came, gave no hint of the tears that ached in her throat.

"You have your key-ring, dear? I left it on your tray."

"Yes. It's in my pocket all safe."

Another silence, longer than the last, and this time it was Vincent who spoke. "I think Jenny was pleased with my present, though she could hardly speak, poor old thing. It's a comfort to feel you've such a faithful watch-dog——"

He tried to clear his throat. The attempt proved a failure. So he gave it up and bowed his head upon her hand that lay on his arm.

Outside the wind blew gustily and set a loquacious tassel tap-tapping against a pane. Margaret Leigh, looking down at her son's bowed head, saw only a dark blur. She laid her free hand upon it and let her fingers stray lightly through his hair. Though he kept so still, she could feel that his lashes were wet; and, in spite of stoic resolution, her own tears welled over at last.

That roused him. Lifting his head, he put his arms round her; and for a long while they sat there, clinging together, like two children left in the dark.

It was their real parting. After that, they could go through with the rest——

Less than twenty-four hours later, Vincent Leigh stood alone on the deck of s.s. *Verona*, outward bound: utterly and acutely alone, in spite of the fact that a score of other strange human bodies pressed against the same taffrail, and scores of other eyes were strained to catch the last glimpse of a face, even as his own were striving to keep Wyndham's tall figure and uncovered head distinct from the congested mass of coats and hats and sticks and umbrellas that thronged the quay. Some of the umbrellas were up, for a fine rain was falling. The throb of the engines underfoot quickened perceptibly. Vincent waved his cap aloft in response to Wyndham's upraised arm. There were endless arms that waved erratically like branches in a wind. Here and there a handkerchief flashed. Vincent became so absorbed in straining to keep sight of his own human fragment in that crowd, that he almost forgot to be unhappy.

Quicker purred the engines—and quicker still. That which had been a living crowd was now no more than an ink smudge between the line of breakers below and the dingy mass of buildings above.

Again a little while, and England had dwindled to a mere pencil-streak upon the dismal vastness of rain-blurred sea and sky——.

PHASE II.

"CETTE PETITE FILLE . . ."

CHAPTER I.

"It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself. . . . The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own."
—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

"GOD is merciful. Behold the camping-ground! Though I said no word to the Sahib, my foot is not yet fit for the road. That Shaitan Azin Khan, discovering I was on leave, contrived to send me back with a flea-bite in mine ankle. When I return again, he will discover that Allah ud Din neither forgets nor misses his mark. And it will be his last discovery this side of Hell!"

The speaker was Vincent's Havildar, exchanging confidences with a fellow-villager in the Pathan company of a certain Sikh regiment to which Vincent Leigh had been posted two months earlier; but, for all Wyndham's coaching, he had not yet enough Pushtu to catch more than a phrase here and there. The autumn reliefs were shifting them from Bannu to Kohat, that now lay two marches ahead along the dusty interminable road—a mere scratch on the face of the desert through which they moved at the rate of ten or twelve miles a day.

Always on the right the same level monotone of sand and scrub, stretching away and away till it was lost in a haze of white dust. Always on the left more sand and scrub, merging into the outworks of the mountain barrier that acts as a monster *chevaux de frise* between India and Afghanistan.

On the whole, Vincent Leigh found himself attracted

by the face of this harsh, unlovely Border country between the Indus and the hills. In its very harshness he recognised a tonic quality such as he had not found in the slow-moving, agricultural atmosphere of the Punjab, where the ambitions were massed in colleges, and those of the old order perseveringly scratched the surface of an unresponsive earth. Here the very soil seemed to exhale a secret, implacable hostility towards life of any kind, and the hills sprang up out of the desert like an armoury of drawn swords.

At Bannu, it had fascinated him to ride out alone in the evenings, away from bungalows, barracks, and military roads, and lift his eyes to those hills that held no promise of help, but rather a stern and bracing challenge. Already he felt nearer to a sympathetic understanding of this unknown country and its peoples than to the casual, kindly handful of Anglo-Indians, for most of whom India seemed merely a vast, vague background against which games were played and reputations lost or won. For Vincent Leigh it had a significance amounting to fascination; and he had arrived in the country with just enough knowledge of it to make him eager for more: a fact he had soon learnt to conceal as if it were a vice. For it had been duly rubbed into him by his brother officers, that one didn't display an indecent interest in "the aborigines," or in anything else, for that matter, except regimental achievements on the cricket-field or polo-ground; and he had suffered, in the process, the pains that youth is privileged to inflict on youth all the world over.

But that hidden interest had deepened steadily, and he had found means in plenty of gleaning the knowledge that he craved. His Munshi, a man of caste and understanding, had proved a mine of wealth; and between zest for information and his own natural aptitude for languages, his knowledge of the vernacular had progressed in leaps and bounds.

The same could hardly be said of his progress in

other directions. During this, his first year of regimental life, he had grown more silent, more aloof. He had hung about miserably, by order, at regimental "At Homes," and had twice set foot in a ballroom —also by order; because it was the whole duty of subalterns to keep up the social credit of "the Regiment."

But though he might be reckoned a fool socially, he had his own effectiveness along other lines. His Adjutant found him "a devil to work," and his Munshi praised him to the skies. For himself, his natural powers of observation, quickened by loneliness, were exercised to no small advantage upon the men with whom he worked and ate and occasionally played; and now, after a year of their society, he still remained an observer rather than a sharer in the friendly, vigorous, and essentially masculine life about him.

That year had left its mark on him without and within. It had bronzed his face, hardened the set of his jaw, and deepened the brooding shadow in his eyes that looked grey in repose, but could flash with a blue light when he was roused. His shoulders had lost their tendency to stoop; and there was about his whole bearing a suggestion of latent vitality not to be discerned a year ago. His company was fifth in the long line of tramping men. At the head of it rode Captain Eden, his immediate superior in the round of regimental duty; a square-built, heavy-looking individual, the last man Vincent would have chosen to work with out of the seven officers who just then represented the regiment. But happily there were others of quite another stamp; notably Colonel St John, C.B., a genuine soldier and a cultivated man, terms not quite so incompatible as Vincent had reckoned them once upon a time.

More accessible than the Colonel was Lynn Howard —Adjutant, senior subaltern, and, withal, the life of the corps. His appearance alone proclaimed him a man to be reckoned with; over six feet, and broad in

proportion, dark chestnut hair that grew thick and crisp on his powerfully modelled head; a straight outstanding nose and blue eyes so clear and challenging that they gave an added impression of hardness to a face which already had too few soft lines. It was the face of one thoroughly competent to deal with his fellows singly or in the mass; of a man serenely sure of himself; a state of mind far removed from the petty assertiveness of mere conceit. As an officer, Howard was second to none in devotion to the Great Fetish, and balanced matters by a certain frank, irresistible selfishness as an individual. He had his own way with most things and most people, from his sepoys to his partners at dances, whose hearts he had an awkward trick of annexing on a short lease, with a convenient disregard for possible consequences.

In regiments of good repute, there will usually be found one or more of such outstanding personalities; and the 9th Sikhs, doubly blessed in their Colonel and Adjutant, took a personal pride in their own good fortune.

But there are ways and ways of worshipping the Great Fetish: and Vincent had already discovered that, in this new atmosphere, keen interest, even in the 'aborigenes,' was not synonymous with "bad form." He also began to perceive that the fetish worship expected of him was something more than a mere corporate form of self-conceit; that the inmost virtue of this particular faith, as of most others, lay chiefly in its effect on the men who held it with a deep, unquestioning fervour which, in some cases, lifted it to the level of a religion. Such a faith, so held, gives, even to the least intelligent and least heroic unit of the whole, a touch, if no more, of the dignity imparted by sincere conviction of any kind: a dignity that disarms criticism even though it fail to convert the critic.

But here was the camping ground, as Allah ud Din had said. Lively bugle notes sounded the "Halt."

Officers shouted words of command. The ordered mass broke up into scattered fragments, and very soon the desert blossomed with service tents, dust-coloured like itself, with the red flower of camp fires and blue-grey plumes of wood smoke; and, to all intents and purposes, that day's work was at an end.

The men spent their evening squatting round their own particular fires; here a group of Pathans, seasoning their curry and chupatties with coarse jests; there, half a dozen Sikhs, with their inimitable air of standing head and shoulders above the rest of the creation. Farther on a company of Dogras were scrupulous to preserve their meal even from the shadow of pollution. And a little apart from all these, in their modest Mess tent, sat the eight Englishmen responsible for the welfare, discipline, and loyalty of seven hundred odd human beings of alien race and creed, linked by a threefold faith in the "*Pultan*," the British officer and the great White Queen.

In the Mess tent there was smoking also, for the informal meal was over. The Colonel, a fair, quiet man, had gone off with Howard for a stroll round the camp; and on his departure talk grew more unrestrained. There was even a perceptible change of tone. The next two senior officers, Major Williams and Captain Eden, were men of quite another stamp than St John. There was power of a sort in Eden's rough-cut nose and chin — a power that might too easily degenerate to violence. The line of his jaw was more blurred than it should have been at six-and-thirty, and unmistakable signs of ill-temper marred the whole. As a younger man he had been good-looking; and, in his own fashion, he was good-looking still.

He had emptied his glass several times during the meal and the Colonel's exit unloosed his tongue. He moved into Howard's empty chair next Williams, a

sandy-haired man, whose negligible features were incidents of no great importance in the glowing expanse of his face. Both officers were married, and their wives had gone on ahead of the Regiment to Kohat. When these two fraternised, they either talked shop or told broad stories—the broader the better. To-night they told stories that had rarely even freshness to commend them; and it is to be feared that the five juniors were not impressed.

Roddy Maclean—a big, ugly Scot, with a job-lot of features, and a lively humour—amused himself and delighted the others by firing off his hearty guffaw punctually a few seconds in advance of the point; and thanks to his unsuspected assistance, Williams and Eden believed they were surpassing themselves in their own particular form of wit. Next to Maclean sat the doctor, Captain Alton, a sallow, keen-eyed man; and opposite these were the junior subalterns, Vincent Leigh and Gerard Myles—commonly called Jeremiah by reason of his invincible optimism. Dapper, neat-featured and quick-witted, Jerry was popular alike with men and women, a smart officer, and altogether a regimental asset in his own diminutive fashion. Him Vincent had mentally labelled the "social credit kind"; while he, on his part, had been quick to recognize an intellect many degrees superior to his own; and already the beginning of a friendly intimacy had sprung up between them.

Now, under cover of Maclean's broadsides, Vincent muttered impatiently, "I say, Jerry, I've had enough of this." And pushing back his chair, with a sigh of relief, he went out into the encompassing quiet of the night.

A moon, nearing the full, added her own mysterious effect of light and shade to the weird desolation of the scene: and moonlight still had power to stir, in Vincent's heart, an intolerable nostalgia for the cliffs of Tintagel and the roar of surf among the rocks.

Now there came to him instead the roar of Maclean's

big voice announcing with more fervour than melody that—

> "The boar who can charge like the Light Brigade
> Is the no-blest creature that God ever made."

The welcome diversion had been Jerry's doing, and not till the song was ended did Eden notice that Leigh had left the tent.

"That young prig gone off again to his confounded books, I suppose," he remarked gruffly. "Infernal cheek, I call it. As if our company wasn't good enough for him!"

"No loss to *this* company anyway," put in Williams with his fat chuckle. "The feller's long face gives me the blues. Can't think what possessed the General to foist a 'Varsity chap on *us*. You mark my words, they're ruining the Service nowadays by sending us the wrong sort."

Maclean grinned at the threadbare prophecy that came round as regularly as a clock striking the hour.

"It's early days, Major, to be labelling Leigh the wrong sort. But we *are* getting too many of 'em, no question, in the Army as well as the Civil. If it goes on, it will be a bad look-out for our *izzat* in this country. No one keener than a native to spot the *pukka* Sahib."

Williams rapped the table. "Hear, hear, Roddy! You talk like a book. Damn all this new-fangled mixing of the classes, I say, and this craze for wholesale education. The old hard riding, hard living British officer was a deal more serviceable for these parts than your brainy grocer's son or your mincing, modern, barley-water cadet."

"Blest if you can put Leigh into either category, Major. He's a gentleman and the son of a soldier. After all, Sir Theo's a Piffer himself. You bet he knows the breed we want up here: and Howard seems pretty well satisfied."

"That settles the matter!" A sneer lurked in

Eden's bantering tone. He was jealous of Howard both as an officer and a man. "Right sort or wrong, you can take your oath, I'll sweat some of Leigh's damned Oxford airs out of him before I've done!"

"Poor old Vinx!" muttered Jerry, pushing his chair back noisily to cover the remark. "Come on, Roddy. Who said Bridge?"

And as the three juniors went out, Williams and Eden refilled their glasses.

CHAPTER II.

"Some can take quiet thought to wife;
I am all day at tierce and carte;
Since I have sworn to live my life
And not to keep an easy heart."
—R. L. S.

It was evening, and Vincent sat alone in his room that already showed a more or less settled aspect, though the Regiment had only marched into Kohat that morning. Most of the private luggage had gone on ahead by ekkha; and the bearer worth his salt has a genius for transformation scenes of the rough-and-ready order.

Already blue and white dhurries decently veiled the well-worn matting taken over from the last tenant, together with a bazaar writing-table, a cane lounge, and a low bedstead with red lacquer legs, where Vincent's mess kit and Wellingtons lay awaiting his pleasure. Already his collapsible bookcase had been set up and filled with a mixed array of books not often found in a subaltern's bedroom. The white-washed walls were still unadorned except by nails or broken nail-marks of some vanished subaltern moved on elsewhere; and high above one of the cobwebbed window slits there yawned an ominous-looking crack, the legacy of an earthquake that had violently shaken Kohat and its houses some ten years ago.

Vincent had secretly hoped for a bungalow to himself; but it seemed that Jerry had ordained otherwise; and there was no resisting Jerry when he set out to make himself pleasant.

Howard and Maclean would share a bungalow, as of custom. Indeed, they shared everything, from bungalows to boots. Not even the earliest of early Christians can have excelled these two in the brotherly virtue of having "all things common." Equal in height and breadth, they wore each other's tunics, overalls, and shirts, to the distraction of two punctilious bearers. They rode each other's ponies and, according to Jerry, paid each other's bills.

Vincent, diplomatically approached by Myles, had permitted himself to hesitate—and was lost. For sanctuary, he could only count upon his whitewashed wilderness of a room with one stretch of verandah; and even there he would be liable to unauthorised inroads from his "stable companion." But of what avail are the idiosyncrasies of one insignificant unit against the unwritten law of a custom-ridden country?

If subalterns were in the habit of sharing bungalows, it was obviously useless to indulge in private opinions on the subject; and he was fain to admit that he might have been very much worse off. At this moment, however, he was transported hundreds of miles from local tyrannies and reminders of banishment. For it was mail day; and he had hurried over from the Garrison Mess to enjoy the contents of a thick envelope addressed in his mother's delicate, restrained handwriting.

The letter was headed Venice, and the three closely written sheets were signed "Margaret Wyndham." The sight of that new signature still, at times, brought twinges of jealousy to Vincent's heart. For the past eleven years she had been so entirely his in thought and act—more so than any masculine mind could conceive: and now this other, with his sympathy and never-failing care for her, must eventually usurp the first place in her heart that belonged of immemorial right to himself.

It was nearly eight months now since the news had reached him that they two, in their mutual loneliness,

had decided to devote what remained of their lives to each other.

"But don't imagine for a moment, my son," she had written then, "that this late-blossoming happiness can in any way come between you and me. My feeling for you is as much a thing apart as my religion. That's the truth; and you must believe it. Don't smile at us either, Vincent, as a pair of grey-headed fools playing at passionate lovers and trying to recapture the delusion of youth. Take any view of our marriage but that. There are many ways of caring, thank God, and I am more than satisfied."

In the face of such noble simplicity and dignity, no wonder the boy had found it a hard matter to express his tangle of emotions, his thankfulness for her, his confidence in Wyndham. And her weekly letters, during those first few months of marriage, were of a tenderness and intimacy that made them peculiarly sacred in the eyes of her banished son. None the less, there were still bad moments of selfishness, or of sheer despondency, when too complete a realisation of her happiness intensified his own acute sense of isolation in this lively and apparently unthinking world of British India, — a world dominated by officialdom, personalities, and abbreviations.

What are they, after all, these Anglo-Indians, and what spell is put upon them by the land of their service, that even their own countrymen deem them almost a race apart? Those that best know them are least ready with a definition: and as for the verdict of the travelled observer, one of the breed dismisses them airily as "a little scattered garrison . . . mute, snobbish, not obviously clever and obviously ill-educated," stewards of great mysteries who "don't and won't understand any race but their own"; while another, seeing a few inches deeper, detects under the surface of muteness and officialism the sturdy self-control, the patient and persistent driving force that have made the country what it is to-day.

But what cared Vincent for Anglo-Indians or their

significance in the cosmic scheme when his eyes were devouring those closely written sheets from Venice? They had been written in the first flush of revelation, and Vincent, as he read, found his imagination fired by visions of the Adriatic under an Italian moon, of the Grand Canal with its gondolas and bridges; of lesser waterways with their inimitable splashes of colour and no less inimitable smells. But before the second sheet was finished, visions were shattered by the view-halloo of Jerry Myles, followed by Jerry himself in speckless flannels and regimental blazer, not a hair out of place on his sleek brown head or in his tooth-brush moustache. Even more than most of his race and service, Jerry gave the impression that the bulk of his spare time must be spent in his tub.

At the sound of his voice, Vincent consigned him to the devil; but more and more he found it difficult to present an ungracious front to Jerry's smiling certainty that his presence could not be otherwise than welcome at any hour of the day or night. On this occasion he was obviously too full of his news to give the matter a thought.

"My sainted aunt! You did ought to have been in the anteroom just now, Vinx," he declared as he plumped down on the end of Leigh's charpoy, avoiding the sacred shirt.

"Why? Anything special?" Vincent asked, pocketing his precious letter and resigning himself to the inevitable.

"Rather! Old Howard on the war-path. There'll be larks after Mess to-night, sure as my name's Jeremiah! But I forgot. You're all in the dark."

"It mightn't be a bad idea to begin at the beginning," Vincent suggested mildly.

"Right you are! The end's better fun, though." And setting both hands on his knees he announced in an immaculate, first-lesson voice: "Now there came to the land of the Hittites and the Jebusites, and the Perizites, a certain *Stunt Sahib*——"

"What's that?" Vincent queried. "Please interpret as you go."

Jerry flung up his hands. "Lord, man, call yourself a linguist! Don't you know yet that *Stunt Sahib* is Hindustani, pure and undefiled, for an Assistant Commissioner of the Punjab Civil Service?"

"Well, I know it now! What about this particular specimen?"

"Oh, he's a *Stunt Sahib* of the stuntest. Not a bad fellow, really; but I believe he's spent his first few years in some God-forsaken hole where they sport a civilian and a doctor and a canal chap, plus a handful of half-castes. So he hasn't come up against soldier-*lōg* much, but now he's here he's got to learn not to air his very private opinions in the anteroom of a Piffer Mess, and I've a notion that Howard means to be his godfather and godmother in his baptism. May I be in at the baptism, that's all!"

"What a pack of schoolboys you fellows are!" Vincent remarked, with his whimsical smile.

"Well, we ain't ashamed of it. There's worse folk in the world than schoolboys. But we've slid away from the Stunt Sahib—name of Mayne. Only took over charge yesterday. Jolly good luck for him to find himself Honorary Member of a Mess, after solitary confinement with the doctor and the canal chap and the half-castes. But we must get him off his heaven-born stilts if the pleasure's going to be mutual. Well, Howard and I chanced to be sitting near him when the newspapers came in, and he pounced on the *Saturday Review* like a terrier on a rat. They'd been talking a bit before that; but I don't believe Mayne knew who Howard was; which is some excuse for him, though not much. Anyway, as he settled his nippers, I saw Howard's eagle eye watching him over the top of the *Graphic*, and felt pretty certain things would happen.

"'Sound paper, that,' Howard remarked casually. 'But a bit too supercilious at times.'

"The heaven-born took stock of him for a second, then contradicted him flat. 'I don't agree with you

there. It's a first-rate paper. The best of its kind. Never thought I'd have the luck to find it in *this* part of the world.'

"'Thought you'd have to live on the Pink 'Un and the sporting papers, eh?' says Howard, as mild as you please. 'What's wrong with the immaculate *Saturday* that it shouldn't be thought fit reading for soldiers?'

"'Who said there was anything wrong with it?' parried the Stunt Sahib, stiffening a bit. He didn't seem to relish being catechised. He wanted to read his blessed paper. 'But it's mostly political and literary and——' He stuck hopelessly.

"'And soldiers aren't much given that way? Have it out!' said Howard, coming to the rescue. But Mayne wasn't grateful. Not a bit.

"'I never said so,' he retorted, stiffer than ever. 'But I gather that's the general opinion. Personally, I have no knowledge of soldiers.'

"'Ah! now you talk sense,' says Howard, still cool as a cucumber. And laying aside the *Graphic* he leaned forward a bit and spoke to that benighted heaven-born like a father. Then he just got up quietly, collected Roddy with his eyes, and went straight out of the Mess. They'll be up to some little game to-night, you bet!"

"Poor Stunt Sahib!" muttered Vincent, remembering the days of his own initiation.

"Not a bit of it. If Civil chaps, all and sundry, are to have the run of Piffer Messes, they must learn the rules of the game. And they're none the worse for learning 'em either. You mark my words—as the Major says—there'll be larks to-night when the seniors have departed."

Vincent determined not to outstay the seniors if he could help it, and his hand went hopefully to his pocket. But Myles was off again, on a fresh tack, and his first words checked the remonstrance on Leigh's lips.

"By the way, I've news for you. Your friend General Desmond arrived this evening. He's not

dining to-night, as he gets in rather late. But he'll dine to-morrow."

Vincent's brow cleared. This was more interesting than a dozen Stunt Sahibs. "He's my stepfather's friend. I've never set eyes on him. But I knew his son at Sandhurst. What's Sir Theo up for, I wonder?"

"He's bringing his daughter here to stop with the Edens. Mrs Eden's father was a Desmond, you know. They say the daughter's stunningly pretty. Luck for us!"

"You're welcome to my share of that kind of luck," Vincent remarked unmoved. "Stunningly pretty girls are not my line. I hoped they were still rather scarce on the Border."

"So they are, I grieve to say. You needn't distress yourself over this one. There'll be plenty of us ready and willing to stand in your light. Of course, if she happens to catch Howard's fancy, the rest of us'll be nowhere. By the mercy of Providence, she may be too young for his taste. He mostly prefers them married."

"And mostly has his way with the lot of them, I should say. He has all the qualifications—thews and sinews, and his colossal self-assurance."

Something in Vincent's tone made Jerry raise his eyebrows. "Sour grapes, is it, old man?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. And it really doesn't matter. Women don't come into my scheme of things. But the trouble about this one is that I'm bound to be polite to her within reason. You see I know the brother, and we're more or less connected up by my stepfather's peculiar relation to the family. The young ones call him Uncle Paul, and she may be for claiming me as a sort of cousin on the strength of it."

"Never mind, old chap," Jerry consoled him feelingly. "I'll do buffer between you and play cousin to her for you with all the pleasure in life. Am not I Jeremiah, the handy man of the Regiment?"

"You're the prize idiot of the Regiment!" Vincent

broke in, half laughing, half exasperated. "For Heaven's sake, take yourself off and let me finish my mail letter in peace."

Jerry, impervious to everything but the dismissal direct, sprang promptly to attention and marched off without another word.

With a sigh of relief, Vincent reopened his letter, found his place, and read on. But violent impact with Jerry and his Stunt Sahib and his "stunningly pretty girl" had broken the spell. While his eyes took in the words he found his mind reverting to the intrusion of Thea Desmond, even wondering, in spite of his annoyance, whether she was the least like Paul. He had refused a very kind and pressing invitation from the Desmonds to spend part of his leave with them in Murree last hot weather, mainly because he shirked close contact with that unknown quantity, a girl of nineteen who might expect him to "be friends"; and now she must needs turn up at Kohat. He admired Mrs Eden. She was one of the few women with whom he could feel at ease. And the occasional pleasure of going to see her would be spoilt by the presence of this intrusive girl.

"Oh Lord!" he groaned miserably, as he got up to dress. "Can one *never* be left in peace? Why the deuce couldn't she have stayed in Pindi with her own people?"

CHAPTER III.

"Beneath those roughened exteriors what treasures are there in reserve, of uprightness, of kindness, of silent heroism . . . !"

—ROMAIN ROLLAND.

IN the Mess anteroom before dinner, Vincent found himself standing near the new Assistant Commissioner. He was a rather noticeable young man; square-shouldered, with a good forehead, eyebrows that came down like thatched eaves above his eyes, and an obstinate mouth. It was not the face of an adaptable nature; but that capable brow suggested brains of no mean order, and Vincent felt his interest stirred.

A captain of the Punjab Cavalry introduced them, and they exchanged casual remarks till dinner was announced. Vincent, at best, could make little headway with a stranger; but some impulse—sympathy or perversity, who shall say?—kept him close to this one during the general move into the Mess room, where he secured a seat beside that tactless civilian with the looming brows, and then discovered that Roddy had done the same. Howard sat opposite, several places down; but Vincent saw them exchange glances, and was the more determined to conquer the accursed shyness that fettered his tongue. Quite possibly Mayne had been through Oxford; and he relied on that chance to work the miracle. But, as usual, he found it ridiculously hard to begin.

Most of the diners—there were at least thirty of them—sipped their soup and sherry in an appreciative silence; while Mayne himself was obviously absorbed

in studying the faces, the uniforms, and the imposing array of plate contributed by three Infantry battalions, a Mountain Battery, and a regiment of Punjab Cavalry that formed the garrison of Kohat. There were cups for polo, cricket, and shooting; and at intervals there were Burmese bowls of beaten silver, mounted on ebony and filled with yellow chrysanthemums. A silver candelabra in the centre of the table bore seven tall candles with red shades; and round the walls bazaar bracket lamps were set, like poor relations, permitted to be useful but compelled to keep their distance.

Among the men themselves, though regiments and individuals varied with the rotation of reliefs, there prevailed a striking unity of type: and to-night young Godfrey Mayne from the height of his civilian intellect was engaged in weighing it and finding it wanting. Critically scanning that mixed company of Frontier soldiers, he saw, or chose to see, greater variety in the uniforms than in the faces of the men—keen and bronzed most of them, save for certain full-blooded seniors who favoured a redder tone; while here and there the vivid marks of the chin-strap indicated a new-comer.

Frank, alert, disciplined faces they were; and for the most part, singularly thought-free. "Not half a dozen spare ideas among the lot of them," was Mayne's sweeping conclusion; and straight there sprang to mind the face—quite a noticeable face—of the subaltern who had spoken to him before dinner.

"One of the chin-strappers," he classified him in ignorance of his regiment; and turning to scan his own side of the table, discovered, with a start, that the "chin-strapper" was his left-hand neighbour for the meal.

"Very imposing show this, of its kind," he remarked conversationally. "No wonder you Army fellows have a good conceit of yourselves. All this—er—fancy kit and paraphernalia, this pomp and circumstance even over such a plain fact as eating your dinner, must help

to give you a jolly sustaining sense of your own vast importance in the scheme of the Universe."

"Must it?" Vincent asked without a shadow of sarcasm. "Can't say it's affected me that way. Some consolation to think it may—in time. But I'm still rather new to it. You see—I came through Oxford."

At that word Mayne's heavy face lit up as though an electric switch had been turned on within. "Great Scott! You're an Oxford man? So'm I—what college?"

"Oriel."

"Same here. Odd coincidence. What did you take?"

"History—a Second."

"I took 'Greats.' Worked with old Biffles. Grand fellow, isn't he?"

They were off now, full swing. Decidedly Oxford had worked the miracle. Oblivious of their surroundings, they compared notes and exchanged reminiscences, falling back instinctively into the old shibboleths: echoes from those few and magic years that leave their impress for all time.

To Maclean, had he been attending, their talk would have seemed pure Greek; but he had plunged into a hot argument on the Boundary question with his right-hand neighbour, and was not even aware of Leigh's sudden friendliness with "the accused," doomed to be court-martialled by the subalterns of Kohat, for impugning, in their own anteroom, the intellect of the Punjab Frontier Force.

So they talked Oxford, and again more Oxford, till, for Mayne, those two lonely years at Hissar seemed like a watch in the night. Then Vincent spoke of Sandhurst, and his conviction that the year there ought to be abolished for University men.

"'M, yes. Rather a jar—Sandhurst after Oxford," Mayne remarked with feeling. The sullen, half-defensive look had left his face. "I wonder, now, is the 'Varsity a sound prelude to—this sort of thing?"

Vincent was silent a moment, scanning that noisy,

brilliant table. "I've wondered too," he said slowly. "Perhaps—purely from the soldier's point of view the old plan was better, starting them straightaway at sixteen or so. Personally, I wouldn't have missed those three years for a fortune. They gave one ideas and ideals, and taught one to think."

"Just so. But candidly—isn't the art of thinking a rather superfluous accomplishment in the Army?"

The tinge of contempt in Mayne's tone stirred in Vincent the first glow of feeling for "the Service" that he had yet known.

"I'm not going to admit that," he retorted with a touch of warmth. "After all, I'm a soldier myself—of sorts. And the more one sees of these fellows, the more chary one gets about sweeping assertions, that are apt to be fallacious in any case."

"Quite so," Mayne admitted, with a faintly superior smile. "And of course I'm hardly in a position to judge: but it's a commonplace that the Army kills individuality——"

"Excuse me," Vincent broke in hotly. "Individuality—the real thing, is indestructible. The Service moulds the average man to its own pattern. That's nearer the mark. But you can't judge men wholesale. I made that mistake myself. It's astonishing how hopeless quite a decent lot of human beings can seem if you take them in the mass. You have to get at individuals." Even in speaking he was surprised to find how this stranger's opposition had struck into conscious life his own half-realised change of view.

"Perhaps so," Mayne conceded grudgingly. "I confess I'm sceptical."

"And prejudiced?" Vincent queried sweetly.

The civilian shot a glance at him from under those eave-like brows. "Well—I admit an ingrained antagonism to the military spirit and all it stands for."

"Let's hope we are to have the privilege of converting you."

"Not very likely. I'm doubtful if a man ever really changes in the grain. But it's an interesting problem."

"It is," Vincent agreed with emphasis, realizing suddenly that he had staked his own future on the possibility. "I suppose it all hinges on the one eternal riddle—Is Change, in its cosmic aspect, a reality or an illusion?"

Mayne, it seemed, had no doubts on that score. "Why, man, of course it's an illusion, like the whole bag of tricks."

"But that's precisely what I can't bring myself to believe."

Once again Oxford had them in its grip. Mayne, who was an adept at arguing, had the further advantage of specialized study and the fact that for him it was simply an affair of intellectual sword-play.

With Vincent the matter went deeper. For him philosophy was nothing if not a key to unlock the riddle of life. He could find neither use nor meaning in a system of pure reason that dismissed as "mere appearance" man's tingling sense of the reality and significance of his own actions, choice, and will.

Mayne, secure on the philosophical rock of ages, laughed him to scorn, and his tone at last goaded Vincent into some show of heat. "Right or wrong, my dear chap, sneering proves nothing. I admit you have big names behind you; but, when all's said, the fact remains that their infallible system owes its very existence to those supreme 'illusions' human thought and human choice. Your sceptics and pessimists have a convenient knack of begging all the really vital questions——"

He broke off, hot and tingling. For a lull had fallen at that end of the table, and he became suddenly aware that the eyes of some six or eight officers were fixed on him in blank amazement, while Roddy, reaching out behind Mayne, gave his shoulder-knot a friendly shake.

"Dry up, Leigh," he said in a stage whisper. "This isn't a bally debating club."

The injunction was superfluous. Vincent, his throat constricted, his cheeks burning, collected the last mor-

sel of his savoury and tried to look as if he had not heard. But the rest were merciless. Chaff rained upon the head of the luckless junior who had inadvertently made himself conspicuous.

"Confound you, Maclean! I was just beginning to catch on!" cried a jovial Captain of the Punjab Infantry.

"Go it, Leigh! Don't mind us!" chimed in another; and a third: "Let's have a free translation, old chap. It sounded damned elevating."

Bobby Blake of the Punjab Cavalry—a small, foxy-faced man, with a reddish moustache and a redder nose—adjusted his eyeglass and surveyed the new "specimen" opposite with cool deliberation; then leaning round, he addressed Howard, who sat a few places beyond.

"I say, Howard," he drawled, "hope the poor feller's not often given that way! It might be catching!"

"You shut up, Bobby," Howard retorted sharply. "You'd be immune, anyhow."

But when Vincent, grateful and astonished, glanced in that direction, he encountered a flash of Howard's extraordinarily blue eyes that cursed him for a young fool almost as audibly as if he had said it across the table.

Roddy Maclean, the kindliest soul alive, started a roar of laughter by a rattling story *à propos de bottes;* and the tide of general conversation rolled on as before.

The whole thing had passed in a few minutes. Those at the farther end of the table were not even aware of it. Only one misguided junior subaltern sat silent and buffeted in the midst of the men he had been loyally upholding against the implications of the scorner.

Under cover of the renewed chatter Mayne tried to rally him. "I wouldn't let myself be put out," said he, "by the chaff of a few damn fools who have no more manners than brains."

Vincent thrust out his lower lip. "I was the fool not to notice," he said; "anyway, the thread of the argument's broken——" He stopped. Every one had stopped. The President at the far end of the table had lifted his glass.

"Mr Vice—the Queen," said he; and a cavalry subaltern at the other end stood up to give the toast of the evening. "Gentlemen—the Queen!"

At that the whole room rose also; thirty lifted glasses winked in the lamplight, and there ran round the table a disjointed murmur: "The Queen! God bless her!"

"An impressive little ceremony," Mayne remarked as they sat down.

Vincent merely nodded. There was no more to be got out of him that evening.

Back in the anteroom, the men hung about for a time in groups, then gradually dispersed; the seniors to whist, the juniors to billiards or bridge, the new craze lately imported from Russia. Maclean and Myles were badly bitten. Major Williams disapproved "on principle."

"Only give him time," said Roddy cheerfully, "and he'll discover with enthusiasm that it's ruining the Service! Meanwhile we can indulge ourselves with a clear conscience. Come on."

CHAPTER IV.

"The most beautiful adventures are not those we go to seek."—R. L. S.

Soon after half-past ten seniors began to filter out Maclean and Jerry had not reappeared; Howard was safe in the billiard-room; and Vincent—having finished a striking article on the Balance of Europe—decided to follow the lead of the older men.

His absence would probably vex Howard, and, on the whole, he did not feel attracted by Mayne; but his sense of fellowship with Oxford prevailed. Quietly laying aside his review, he slipped on his military cape and went out into the darkness: a darkness that throbbed and flashed with stars. The sky was sheeted with them:—a shimmer of gold in the north and west, paling to frosted silver in the east, where the moon's resplendence put them to shame. Southward they were veiled by a fleet of curded clouds becalmed in the stillness of the upper air. The Mall, in which he now stood, was of the usual Anglo-Indian pattern, lined with trees, each set in its own island of shadow that intensified the ghostly pallor of the road between. Beyond the Mall, on the barren expanse of the main parade-ground, moonlight was spilled abroad like water, save where more trees clustered about the garrison church, making a greater shadow-island touched with points of light; and away at the edge of all things loomed the ultimate, threatening shadow of the hills. Along the Mall and in the compounds hardly a leaf stirred, so still and keen was the air.

Transfer to the Frontier had renewed Vincent's love of night prowling. Only in darkness, alone with the immensities, could he commune with the poet that lived deep down in him, that shyer self within himself of whose existence even his mother was hardly aware. His sense of place was keen, and he enjoyed the idea of getting his first real impression of Kohat by night. Turning, he strolled towards the Bannu road, past bungalows and compounds, till he neared the one that he knew had been taken by the Edens; for his own stood on rising ground above. Before he reached it, his quick ear caught the unmistakable wail of a violin, and he hurried forward. Of all instruments none stirred him like a violin; and it needed only the thrill of such music so heard to give the finishing touch to this night of moonlight and frost and stars. The player could be no other than Desmond's "stunningly pretty" daughter. Mrs Eden owned nothing more inspiring than a cottage piano, the worse for many moves.

He was abreast of the bungalow now, and so remained, standing close to the low compound wall, shamelessly determined to hear all that there was to hear. The music had evidently been the prelude or interval of a song; for now there came to him, out in the starlit darkness, a girl's voice, singularly true and sweet, a voice that shamed the violin as the moonlight shamed the stars.

The words escaped him, but he recognised the lilting melody of an old Scotch ballad sung to a violin accompaniment of the softest and simplest; so soft that he could scarcely hear it where he stood.

Distracted, he resolved to win closer at any hazard: and slipping between the gate-posts on to the lawn, he took up his stand beneath an old mulberry-tree that threw a great part of it into shadow.

Now he had a view of the front verandah and of two glass doors curtained only by "chicks." One of the doors was half open, and through the chick he could discern the girl's figure that showed like a strip of

moonlight against the piano near which she stood. Some unseen lamp intensified the brightness of her hair. He could watch the graceful sweep of her arm as her bow caressed the strings; but even by a bold forward move he could distinguish nothing of her face. What matter? For the moment, her voice was all; effortless and clear as a bird's, yet exalted far above bird music by its humanly tender modulations. And now the familiar words reached him, soft yet distinct—

"And I hae vowed a virgin's vow,
My lover's fate to share;
And he has given me his heart—
And what can man gie mair?"

The song was all too short, but while it lasted he stood very still, stirred in every fibre by that rarest of earthly things, a disembodied emotion, distilled from the threefold magic of night and music and a voice. Even when it ceased, the echo lingered in his brain, so that he was but vaguely aware of the talk and laughter that followed. He made no attempt to move. He was prepared to stand there indefinitely on the chance of hearing another song.

Then, with a start, he realised that General Desmond and his daughter were on the verandah, that the girl had flung her arms round her father's neck, and was murmuring endearments while he held her close. Vincent, acutely embarrassed, could only turn away his head. Retreat, now, was impossible without risking an undignified scramble over the wall behind, and still more undignified discovery. There was nothing for it but to stand his ground till Desmond had gone; and he thanked heaven for the sound of wheels that brought embarrassing endearments to an end.

Desmond sprang in.

"Mind you come *properly* early," the girl called up to him.

"No fear," the man's voice answered. "Run along in, little girl. It's cold."

She obeyed, and Vincent breathed more freely. In another minute or two he would be safe. But before Desmond passed the tree, something in that direction caught his attention, and turning, he looked straight out across the lawn, his clean-cut face plainly visible in the moonlight. Vincent, startled out of prudence, took a hasty step backward, and in the same breath knew that he was undone.

"Hullo! Who's there?"

Desmond spoke in an alert undertone, and the intruder must needs go forward, his heart knocking at his ribs. But his voice when he reached the trap was quiet and controlled.

"My name's Leigh, sir, of the 9th Sikhs. I must apologise——"

"What—Vincent Leigh? My dear boy——" This remarkably agile General was already out of the trap and completing his broken sentence by a hand-clasp that put apologies and awkwardness to flight. "Not *my* fault—is it?—that we haven't met before now. But what the deuce were you doing there on the lawn? And why didn't you turn up sooner? I'm afraid they're all off to bed."

The man's kindliness and breezy directness were irresistible. Vincent, who would normally have been tongue-tied, felt almost at his ease.

"I'm afraid I wasn't turning up at all, sir," he confessed. "It was the music. Great impertinence on my part. But I heard it in passing, and—I simply had to get nearer at any risk."

General Desmond smiled. "I don't blame you. Hope you enjoyed it?"

"That's hardly the word."

The smile deepened to a glow of approval. "Fool of a boy not to have looked in. But you must come round here to tea to-morrow and meet my Thea. Heard from your mother to-day?"

"Yes. They seem to be having a splendid time in Venice."

"I shall hear all about it next week from Paul

He's a capital correspondent. And he thinks the world of you. So I take it you're pretty good friends —eh?"

Vincent hesitated. "I—well, it goes deeper than that," he answered simply; and Sir Theo Desmond held out his hand.

"We mustn't stay talking here all night; but that makes a good beginning between us—Vincent," he said on a graver note of feeling. "I'm not going to call you Leigh. Paul is the best man, bar none, that I've ever known. You're in luck, and I'm glad you recognise the fact. I've wondered about it often. Now I must go on. See you to-morrow."

Again that vigorous hand-clasp, which spoke, plainer than words, the strength and sincerity of the man. It gave Vincent courage to make the request that was hovering in his mind.

"You won't give me away, will you, sir? If the others got hold of this——"

Desmond laughed. "Very poor fun for you! But you can trust me. I'm a fool about music myself. I'm also pretty intimate with the genus subaltern. So we meet to-morrow for the first time. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir, and thanks very much."

Impossible to convey by that poor phrase his glow of gratitude, no less for Desmond's prompt understanding than for the assurance that his own divine moment would not be torn to tatters by mess-room chaff.

"No wonder that man's loved," was his thought as he stood outside the gate watching the red lights of the trap jog down the Mall. Then he turned and entered the Bannu road.

For nearly an hour he tramped the wide, moonlit highways of Kohat in a serenely exalted mood of mind. Even his zest for exploring the new station had suffered partial eclipse; so poignantly was his imagination stirred by a girl's voice heard in darkness, by that curiously perturbing vision in the verandah, and the brief impact with a magnetic personality which

more than justified his impromptu escapade. Lost in these new thoughts he passed, almost unheeding, the massive shadow of Kohat City that loomed upon his left hand—a tangle of rabbit warrens touched into passing beauty by splashes and pencillings of moonlight. And so on, across the great main road, to the lesser one that runs north-eastward through Kohat Pass to Peshawur. He would fain have tramped for miles along that desolate highway drenched with moonlight; but here, as at Bannu, there were boundaries that checked his budding lust of adventure and condemned him to the chessboard framework of the station itself.

It was near midnight when he turned in between the whitewashed culverts of his own compound, tired yet elated, and feeling farther than ever removed from the earlier events of the evening. But just as he had passed the gate-posts a heavy hand on his shoulder brought him down from the heights with a crash; and a voice—the unmistakable voice of Roddy Maclean—said in sepulchral tones: "Mr Leigh—you're wanted! Be good enough to come along with me!"

CHAPTER V.

"A scorner loveth not one that reproveth him; . . . but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding."—SOLOMON.

VINCENT'S response to that most unwelcome invitation was brief and unvarnished. "Confound you! I want to go to bed."

Then, as he swung round in a vain attempt to free himself, irritation was dissolved in amazement. "Good heavens!" he cried, "what's up now?"

For there confronted him a tall, fantastic figure in a bath-towel dressing-gown, girded with a kummerbund and sword-belt. Mess overalls and Wellingtons showed beneath it, and a cricket cap sat jauntily on the back of Roddy's big head.

Roddy grinned and relaxed his grip. "We've been 'working off' our one and only Stunt Sahib in style—that's all. Fool you were to sneak off and miss the trial scene. Merchant of Venice wasn't in it. Howard's none too pleased with you for backing out. You must have known there'd be something on."

"Of course I knew." Vincent's tone was quiet and decisive. "That's why I had to get away. An Oxford man—my own college too—— It was out of the question. You must see that, Maclean."

Roddy screwed up his flexible face, once likened by an irreverent partner to the india-rubber masks that grow on Christmas crackers. "I admit the position's a trifle delicate. But you're a Piffer now, you see; and orders is you're to be in at the death, even if it meant hauling you out of bed!"

Vincent's face took on the closed-up, obstinate look it was apt to wear when he felt himself cornered, yet did not choose to fight. He made one more effort to assert the liberty of the individual.

"Look here, Maclean, there's no sense in dragging me over to the Mess against my will, simply to see you fellows play the fool. You let me alone now. I'll stand up to Howard in the morning."

Maclean laughed. "'Fraid *I* don't feel like standing up to him to-night. He's not in the mood. So come you must, young 'un. Better do it with a good grace than a bad one."

And he moved towards the road, still with a hand on Vincent's shoulder, so that the rebel had no choice but to move along with him or face the indignity of a 'scene' such as his soul abhorred.

"The court-martial's over by now," Roddy went on cheerfully. "Howard presided in the most fetching kit. The offender flatly refused to make a reasonable apology, and took the whole thing in rather bad part. That only made Howard pile it on the more. He kept the 'Court' in roars of laughter, which didn't improve young Mayne's temper—not much! He seems a good fellow enough, but his sense of humour's a bit groggy. There's a big bump of obstinacy, too; and we're right up against it to-night."

Vincent, remembering Mayne's remarks at Mess, ventured to speak his mind. "You're not going the right way, you know, to improve his opinion of soldiers, and I can't see what satisfaction you can find in baiting an obstinate man——"

Here came a shout of laughter from Roddy. "Satisfaction be blowed! You're a bit off the track, Leigh. We find no satisfaction in baiting any man—unless he's an out and outer. Certain things have to be knocked into certain fellows' heads—that's all; and there's not an ounce of spite in the process. Howard's ragging was sheer burlesque. He even made out a farcical apology to give the fellow a chance. But the fool hadn't enough humour to follow a kindly lead.

"'You can do your damnedest,' was all he said. 'Don't let me spoil your evening's entertainment.'

"The sneer put old Howard's back up; and he wound up by sentencing the offender to be chucked into the swimming-bath, there to disport himself till he should see fit to apologise, as requested. It was only then that he noticed your absence. Jerry and I wouldn't let on. We knew you didn't mean it for cheek. But Howard ordered me to have you out double quick. Said he'd a good mind to give you a ducking into the bargain. I managed to smooth him down a bit, and I'm sure he didn't really want to make a fool of you that way, your first night in Kohat. He's got a sort of sneaking respect for you, Leigh, which isn't his habit with the newly-joined. But it's not a thing to trade on, and you'd better apologise in form."

Vincent set his teeth. "Can't say I feel like apologising."

"Can't say you look like it either! But your private feelings are out of court in this business. Hullo! There they are. Come on, old chap."

There they were—a disorderly splash of shadow on the white road. Vincent wrenched his shoulder free. "You needn't haul me up as if I were a drunk and disorderly," he muttered, and before Maclean could answer he was recognised and acclaimed.

"Good old Knight of the Bath! Got another sheep for the slaughter?"

The drawl was the drawl of Bobby Blake, who commanded the prisoner's escort, in jockey cap and shirt.

"You keep an eye on your own sheep," Maclean retorted with less than his wonted good-humour. "Mine's my own affair."

As he spoke Jerry came forward and secured his friend's arm. "Hard luck you weren't earlier, old chap," he said, genially implying that Vincent had been detained, and the said Vincent thanked him from his heart.

Howard, in a striped shirt, orderly officer's sash and opera hat tilted over one eye, brought up the rear with a Punjab Cavalryman in a turban and silk pyjama coat. Only the chief performers had donned impromptu fancy dress over their Mess kit; and there, in the midst of his lively escort, Mayne trudged, sullen and silent, thinking his own thoughts.

They were close to the swimming-bath now, and within all would be darkness.

"Nip on and light a lamp or two, Jerry," Howard commanded; and Vincent, thankful to escape the neighbourhood of Mayne, hurried on ahead with Myles.

"Poor devil of a Stunt Sahib!" said he, looking down at the ice-cold water in the twilight they had created. "I wish Howard would let him off."

"Well, *I* don't," declared Jerry stoutly. "He had his chance, fair and square; and if he didn't choose—— Yoicks! here they come!"

A motley crew they looked in the yellow gleams of a few ill-trimmed bazaar lamps;—subalterns all, of different regiments, four of them in fancy dress, and most of them in a condition that may be charitably described as 'cheery.' Such mad doings are not for responsible officers. They are the immemorial privilege of the British 'sub.'

Howard and Maclean had the accused between them, relieved of his dress-coat and pumps, ready for the plunge.

"Now then, Mr Mayne!" Howard spoke peremptorily, but with perfect good-humour. "Shall I say the word, or will you?"

Mayne merely thrust out his obstinate jaw; and Howard shrugged his shoulders. "As you please. Go it, Roddy!"

They 'went it' accordingly, with all the force of iron muscles in perfect condition—and there followed a splash that made those nearest jump backwards with remarkable agility.

"Well chucked, indeed!" cried Fielden, the Cavalry-

man in the pyjama coat, as Mayne came up choking and spluttering, a damp lock of hair over one eye, blasphemy upon his lips.

Roused from his half-contemptuous apathy by the shock of cold and the indignity of his plight, he made a vigorous dash for the end of the bath nearest the door. But half a dozen subalterns shouting "No, you don't, ducky!" were there before him.

Foiled, he struck out for the farther side,—with no better result. Then flinging up his head and shaking it like a dog, he recognized Vincent. "Damn you!" he muttered; and Vincent stepped hastily back into the shadow, wondering how the whole crazy business would end.

Back swam Mayne to the end near the door. Back sped the subalterns in high glee. It became a sort of aquatic "hunt the slipper" played to a chanted refrain of "Apologise—apologise! Recant—recant!"

But as yet Mayne would do neither, though his shirt front was reduced to pulp and his saturated clothes impeded him sore. Breathless and half blinded, his one impulse was to force his way out and 'go for them' regardless of the odds against him. Better any amount of rough handling than this entirely good-tempered, yet merciless retaliation, that stripped his dignity from him as effectually as if he had been stripped of his clothes.

Once he gained a corner in advance of his pursuers, and grasping either side succeeded in hoisting himself half out of the water.

Vincent, who stood near, made no attempt to move forward. But there was a shout from the subalterns; and instantly he found himself wedged between Blake and Wood of the 51st P.I. Mayne was thrust back into the water, while Blake—a good deal the worse for after-dinner drinks—spoke thickly in Vincent's ear.

"What the hell d'you mean by that, you young skrimshanker? Comin' late and then tryin' to spoil the fun. If you're so damned sympathetic you can have a taste of it yourself."

Without a word Vincent stiffened in preparation for a struggle; but a hand grasped his shoulder from behind, and the voice of Howard, never more welcome, sounded in his ear.

"Mind your own business, Blake. I'm bossing this show. You let Leigh alone."

Blake consoled himself by giving Vincent's arm a vicious wrench and went off muttering curses.

Then Howard relaxed his hold, and the two confronted one another in silence. Howard's eyes had their hard, bright look, but Vincent's did not fall before them.

"Thank you," he said quietly; and Howard smiled in spite of himself.

"Confound your coolness!" His tone was low and decisive. "It wasn't *their* affair; but it's my private opinion that you deserve it."

"So Maclean's been telling me. But I didn't quite see it. Mayne was at my college, you know."

"H'm." Howard coolly surveyed this new subaltern, who seemed such a queer mixture of sensitiveness and grit. Behind the challenging eyes Vincent thought he detected a latent gleam of approval. He liked the man and decided to swallow his pill.

"I'm sorry all the same—to have annoyed you," he said.

The gleam was no longer latent. "And you won't do it again — till next time? That's all square. Blake's a bit of a cad. Sorry we've hit the same station again.—Hullo, what's up now?"

Mayne, clinging to the opposite corner, seemed near the end of his tether, though he still blasphemed as fiercely as chattering teeth would permit.

Vincent threw a reproachful glance at the arbiter of fate. "Aren't you satisfied yet?"

"*He* is, I should say, which is more to the point," Howard answered coolly. He sprang forward none the less, and thrusting his way through the others confronted that sorry apparition, in the pulpy shirt, that still clung shivering to the edge of the tank.

"Had 'nough?" he demanded schoolboy fashion "Game to apologise?"

"Yes—damn you—I apologise"—furious chattering of teeth intervened—"for speaking the truth—out of season."

A roar of laughter greeted that last, and Howard, gripping his hands, had him out in the twinkling of an eye.

"Trifle chilly, I'm afraid," he remarked sympathetically as Mayne stood before him, shirt and trousers plastered to his figure, rivulets running out of him by the score. "Hurry up, Roddy, with your old towel."

Maclean, discarding sword-belt and kummerbund, wrapped the victim in his own dressing-gown, patting and rubbing vigorously, while Mayne stood like a statue, looking straight before him, though water ran into his eyes and dripped from the end of his moustache.

Howard whipped out a handkerchief. "Here you are," he said. "Beastly uncomfortable. Mop your head a bit."

Wood produced dry shoes; and Roddy, having done what he could with his own garment, annexed Vincent's cloak. "We're going to see you safe out of these togs," he said genially, and secured an elbow through its folds. "Come on, old man."

This to Howard, who had carefully disposed Mayne's dress-coat over his arm and stationed himself by the other elbow.

"Dismiss, you fellows. See after my hat, Jerry, there's a good chap."

And the two went out, as they had entered, the prisoner between them—sadder and possibly wiser for those five minutes of indignity and acute discomfort in the Kohat swimming-bath.

The rest, breaking up into groups, dispersed forthwith. Jerry turned out the lamps, stuck the squash hat on the back of his head, and linked an arm through his friend's as they strolled down the broad

road in a blaze of moonlight; for it was near one of the morning.

Vincent was silent. His smothered revolt against the whole proceeding had been only half mitigated by the finale. To Jerry silence was anathema; and for a space he consoled himself by humming under his breath:

"'I'm sorry for Mr Bluebeard, I'm sorry to cause him pain!'" Then: "You may say what you please," he announced with emphasis (Vincent having said nothing), "Howard's a genuine tip-topper."

Vincent smiled with his whimsical tilt of one eyebrow. "Who ever said he wasn't? He's too hard and cocksure; but he's fair. It's possible we may come within a mile or so of understanding each other —in time. He might have let Mayne down easier though. The poor chap will probably be laid up with a severe chill."

Jerry was optimistic. "Not he! But if he should be any the worse—or imagine he is—those two'll tend him as if he was the only orphan of their dearest friend; you can take my word. Ten to one they'll end by becoming his best pals in Kohat. You've a deal to learn still about the average human animal, Vinx, for all your many brains."

"Well, I'm out here to learn it," Vincent replied meekly; and impulsive Jerry gave his arm a squeeze. "You're the best chap going. That's *my* opinion—if it's worth anything."

"I'm grateful for it anyway!"

Vincent spoke lightly, but he spoke the truth. There were times when he could regard his brother officers from the heights of a serene and critical detachment. There were other times when criticism gave place to a half-envious admiration of their sane and simple masculinity. It was a rather acute phase of this last mood that made Jerry's assurance peculiarly acceptable just then.

But his last thoughts, as he hung upon the verge of sleep, were neither of his fellow-subalterns nor of

Mayne's plight. They were scarcely thoughts at all, but rather the haunting echo of a voice and the memory of a vision that had strangely stirred his heart. Yet, he felt no impatience for a sight of the singer's face. If anything, he dreaded rather more than usual the strain and disillusionment that all nearness seemed to bring.

CHAPTER VI.

"A happy man or woman is a better thing to find than a five-pound note."—R. L. S.

NEXT morning the card of ceremony must be left on General Desmond and his host, Colonel Finlay of the 51st P.I., who commanded the station. The ordeal proved merely a matter of "shooting cards," and as Vincent rode on down the mottled sun and shadow of the Mall, he met Eden bent on the same errand.

"Here's a note from my wife," he said. "She wants you to come and meet your *friend*, the General! I hear you didn't half play up last night; and I tell you straight, if you give yourself airs that way, you'll be sorry for it."

Leigh stiffened visibly at the hint of bullying in Eden's tone.

"I have explained matters to Howard," he said in his quiet, level voice. "I only hope Mayne is none the worse this morning."

Eden chuckled. "Well, he's got a fit of the shivers and he's keeping his bed. Howard and Maclean are fussing over him like a pair of women. Part of their little game, I suppose. I met Roddy just now. Said he'd left Howard entertaining 'the patient' with extracts from the *Saturday Review!* You'd better go and join 'em, since you're so concerned. Shall I tell the wife you'll come this afternoon?"

"Yes — thanks," Vincent answered with formal politeness, and rode on, grateful to be rid of Eden's presence; far from grateful for the ill-natured officious-

ness of the foxy-faced cavalry 'sub,' whose marked intimacy with Eden was evidently not relished by the Regiment. With a sigh of exasperation he slackened his pace and opened Mrs Eden's note.

"DEAR MR LEIGH," it ran, "I want you to be really nice, and come in to tea this afternoon. Sir Theo Desmond particularly wants to see you before he goes. I will be quite above-board, and add that there is also a daughter! But even you couldn't find Thea alarming. Besides Theo's wish is law—so mind you come. —Yours sincerely, PHYLLIS EDEN."

"How on earth did she come to marry him?" was his thought as he pocketed the note; and he decided to arrive before the polo players returned and 'crowded up the place.'

By the time tiffin was over he found himself so abnormally restless that, in the end, he strolled down to the Edens' bungalow quite twenty minutes earlier than he had intended; and on nearing the house he instinctively listened for music—not in vain. No lilting ballad this time; but the provocative strains of the 'Keel Row,' punctuated with treble whoops of joy, and the shuffling of children's feet. For a moment he hesitated: but retreat was out of the question. He might run straight into Desmond's arms, and his ignominy would be complete. His tentative shout for the orderly brought Phil Eden, aged six, charging through the chick; a fragile boy with his mother's clear skin and luminous eyes.

"Oh, we fort you was the General Sahib!" he cried, and slipped confiding fingers into the visitor's hand. "Come along and dance too. Aunt Fea is making ve Keel Row. It's simply scrumshious!" A vigorous tug impelled Vincent to an unceremonious entrance through the chick, personally conducted by Phil, who announced in clear tones: "It's only Mister Leigh. But he's my friend from Bannu, and he's very nice. So you mustn't mind."

A graceful slip of a girl, in forget-me-not blue, came forward, blushing a little and smiling into his disconcerted face. "I'll try not to mind!" she said sweetly. "But you'll have to be specially nice to make up for not being Father."

"I'm afraid—that's not one of my talents," Vincent answered desperately, smiling back at her in spite of himself.

"Isn't it?" She surveyed him with frank interest. "I seem to remember that Paul told us——"

"Paul doesn't count. We happened to get on very well. Have you seen him lately?"

"Not since Murree. He was very disappointed that you wouldn't come up too. So were all of us, because of Uncle Paul. *He* wrote very nice things. But I suppose he doesn't count either!" Her eyes danced mischievously. "Still—I think it *was* rather horrid of you!"

"I—I'm awfully sorry," he stammered, reddening. "I was mugging up for the Higher Standard and——"

"Yes, of course. I was only joking. We all know you're very studious. Quite a swell at the language already, Captain Eden says."

At that he grew redder than ever. "Captain Eden is pleased to be sarcastic," he said, and prayed for the arrival of Desmond to save him from this bewildering girl, whose voice he could listen to for ever—if she would only sing, instead of confounding him with personal remarks.

But though Desmond failed him, there remained Phil Eden, who was woefully bored with this interlude of grown-up amenities.

"Oh, *please!*" he murmured pathetically. "You *did* come in to dance wiv Flop and me."

"Indeed I didn't!" Vincent declared, laughing. But his remonstrance was drowned by Flop, aged three, clad chiefly in an immense blue sash and a mop of brown curls. "Keel wo! keel wo!" she cried, jerking up and down and flapping her arms, while Phil capered round her joining in the chorus.

Thea flung out her hands with an appealing smile. "They're hopeless! The fiddle's bewitched them. Phyllis and the ayah are tangled up with the *durzi* in the back verandah, and I said I'd keep the creatures happy till tea. Would it bore you horribly if I give them another go?"

"Quite the reverse," Vincent declared in all honesty. "I—I'm all right—so long as they don't want me to join. I—I've never danced in my life."

"Never? You *poor* man!"

"Oh, *come* along, Aunt Fea!" Phil plucked impatiently at her skirt.

Thea stooped and kissed him. "We mustn't be rude to visitors, Phil darling. And Mr Leigh doesn't dance; so you're not to bother him. Now then, get into position!"

And Vincent, feeling oddly ashamed of his own disability, consigned himself to an arm-chair near the fire.

The picture he was privileged to watch, at leisure and apart, was for him as full of novelty as of charm: the two small figures prancing with uneven jerks and shrill war-whoops, invariably contributed at the wrong moment; the panel of light from the door that flung a pathway across the blue and red Peshawur carpet and made a halo of Thea Desmond's hair. Emboldened by the length of the room between them, he could feast his eyes on her where she stood in that bright pathway, like a tall blue flower lightly swayed with the wind. He thought of a delphinium in June: not the flaunting giant of many summers, but a yearling plant's first delicate spike of blossom. For she was not over tall, though her young slenderness and the lift of her head gave an impression of height. Her mouth, even in repose, seemed to hover on the verge of speech: and the faint lift of her upper lip gave to the whole sweet face a touch of childlike appeal, the more irresistible that it was quite unconscious. Vincent thought with distaste of Jerry's phrase—'a stunningly pretty girl.' That was all Jerry and his kind would see in

her. His own innate fastidiousness recoiled from the prospect of a whole stationful of men scrambling for her favours. He, at all events, would not scramble. But he was not above a very human satisfaction in his present unsought privilege; though he was neither capable nor desirous of turning it to romantic account.

Now, as he leaned back at ease, he was looking for traces of Sir Theo Desmond in the dreamy seriousness of her face; for, at first, he had been reminded rather of young Paul, in whom, according to Wyndham, his mother lived again. Her wonderful hair—clear brown touched with gold, like autumn beech leaves—came evidently from her mother; as also did the short nose and the soft moulding of her chin, that yet suggested hidden reserves of strength. But in build she was her father's daughter, slim and supple as a young birch; and her forehead and eyes were Desmond's own. Only to the girl Nature had given such delicate curves of eyelid and eyebrow as conspired with her appealing mouth to make her look even younger than her years.

As for her playing, she flung into that simple Scottish reel all the vitality and joy in life that radiated from her like an aura: now crooning it like a lullaby; now surging up to a triumphant crescendo; now hurrying faster and faster in a sheer ecstasy of speed, that sent the jigging babies half crazy with excitement, and recalled to Vincent the breathless delight of racing the wind along the high downs of home.

He hoped fervently that the tangle in the verandah might take a long while untying; but just as the 'Keel Row' merged into 'Charlie is my darling,' the door opened and Sir Theo Desmond stood on the threshold surveying the scene.

"Well, up*on* my word!" said he, as the music broke off and Vincent sprang to his feet. "I'd no idea I was in for an afternoon dance!"

"Yes, dance—*do* dance!" cried the babies, hurling themselves at him.

"Give me a chance, you young demons," he answered, laughing, and kissing his daughter. "Is no one going to introduce me to your audience?"

The blood flew to Thea's cheeks. "Oh, Father, I'm so sorry—it's Mr Leigh."

"Rather hard on Mr Leigh! I'm delighted." He came forward and shook hands. "We must manage a talk when the coast's clearer. Just now these imps appear to be in command of the ship. Strike up again, Thea, and we'll have a foursome. If you'll stand up to Miss Eden, Vincent, I'll tackle young Phil."

But before Vincent could confess his disability, 'young Phil' interposed with grave concern: "Don't bovver him, General Sahib. Aunt Fea said we mustn't. He doesn't want to dance. I fink he's too grown up."

At that Desmond burst out laughing. "My dear Vincent, this is serious! May I ask if that awful accusation is true?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," Vincent answered, reddening to the roots of his hair. "I can't dance anyway."

"Great Scott, boy! There must have been something very wrong with your education. The sooner you learn the younger you'll grow. But 'Aunt Thea' says you're not to be bothered; and we must obey her, mustn't we, Phil? I know I always do! I'll take you infants turn about. Ah, here's Phyllis — the very person."

Phyllis Eden had been reckoned a beauty at nineteen, and at thirty the essentials of beauty were still there. Though her figure was too thin, her cheeks too pale, and her sensitive lips too closely set, there remained her natural grace of movement, her soft abundance of mouse-coloured hair, and the brave light in the blue-green eyes, fringed with very black lashes, that she had passed on to her son.

"My *dear* Theo!" she cried, "I never knew you had come. A shame to victimize you all!"

"Well, you've come just in time to be victimized yourself," Desmond answered, kissing her. "Thea

and I want a Schottische with these demons of yours before we are deluged with polo folk and propriety."

"Oh, Dad—you angel!"

The cry was Thea's, and thereupon more furniture was shifted, with zealous hindrance from excited babies. Mrs Eden sat down to the piano, and with a look summoned Vincent to her side. Thus graciously she included him in the picture, and completed the inclusion by intermittent remarks while she played.

"Prince Charlie!" Thea commanded, "Double quick time." And very soon the children were jigging afresh; while the General Sahib, who owned a V.C. with a clasp—and was obviously not 'too grown up'—executed a Highland fling with the verve and elasticity of five-and-twenty.

As for Thea, her dancing, like her playing, was a thing of infinite lightness and grace, the glad spontaneous surrender to a mood. Eyes and cheeks grew bright and brighter. Head erect, her lips just parted, her body swaying to the irresistible rhythm, she sped this way and that; now opposite Phil; now opposite her father: for they took the children turn about, whirling them off their feet, to their huge and clamorous delight.

Vincent, watching them, was pricked with sudden envy of that capacity for light-hearted fooling, which is not by any means least among the virtues of earth. Why, and again why, should self-consciousness hang like a blight over his simplest words and acts, while this favoured father and daughter seemed hardly to know the meaning of the word? Seen together thus, their essential likeness triumphed over minor differences. They were as obviously one in the great fundamentals as in their radiant certainty that life, at best or worst, was very much worth living: and to Vincent —with his fatal tendency to see life as a forlorn hope, glorified by courage—this divine certainty, the soul's elixir vitæ, seemed the first, best gift of the gods. Already he was deploring his own folly in having refused that invitation last hot weather. To think

that the chance had been offered him of spending a month in daily contact with this man, and that—thanks to his fatal habit of anticipating failure—he had deliberately flung it away——

"I seem to hear horses—don't you?"

Mrs Eden's voice recalled him to reality. The sound of hoofs drew rapidly nearer. Desmond, executing a final whirl, flung Thea, laughing and breathless, into Eden's arm-chair. Phyllis sprang to her feet, and the tense look, that had left her face, cast a light veil over it once more.

"Now then, Flip, see how quickly we can magic everything straight again," she called over the piano-top to her son. "Come on, Mr Leigh. You and I are the freshest."

"Are you, though?" cried Desmond, intercepting her. "No aspersions, please, on my few grey hairs! Here, Vincent, you can lend a hand; and, mind you never let on that this was the manner of your introduction to the General of the Pindi Division! Which it wouldn't be true if you did," he added, with a private twinkle. "So we're quits."

There ensued a lively scramble; for the sound of hoofs was on the drive. Shyness evaporated. Vincent found himself kneeling at one end of the hearth-rug, while Thea Desmond knelt at the other, insisting on an extra inch her way to cover her corner of the fender stool.

"Look alive, you two," cried Desmond, flourishing a cushion. "The enemy is upon us!"

It was true. His spurs were already clinking on the verandah steps. But before any of him reached the drawing-room, a plump ayah had swooped down on her charges and carried them off almost in tears; while Vincent—heartily endorsing Desmond's simile—had retired to a strategic position near the piano, well away from the main theatre of operations.

Here he stood, turning the leaves of Thea Desmond's Scottish song-book, while men surged into the room—Eden and Blake, Howard and Maclean, in polo kit;

Jerry and Wood from the tennis-courts; Colonel and Mrs Finlay from a free-fight over Home papers at the Club. Thea, standing by her father's elbow, must needs run the gauntlet of wholesale introductions, while Finlay—a plain man with a lean, low-comedy face and one sleeve pinned to his breast—recounted the tale of their defeat.

"Not the ghost of a chance for the likes of *us*," he concluded in his deep, lugubrious tones. "First, I've only one hand to grab with; second, we both suffer from having been too well brought up. The present generation possesses neither manners nor compunction. *I* went to that Club to look at the *Graphic*. I've a weakness for the *Graphic*. And what happened? I saw a girl, with a face like a mungoose, deliberately *sit* on it, while she took her own time over the *Queen*. Fact!"

"Julian, *dear*——!" his wife murmured desperately, noting the suppressed mirth of Howard and Maclean.

"Why, what's wrong?" Finlay surveyed the company with his sidelong smile. "No damage, I hope. But she *did* sit on the *Graphic*, and she *has* got a face like a mungoose." Suddenly he caught Howard's eye. "Don't tell me *you* are engaged to the lady! If so, I forbid the banns. Young women with such propensities are not fit instruments——"

"Julian—*really!*"

Mrs Finlay's second protest was lost in a general burst of laughter.

"All serene, sir," Howard reassured him cheerfully. "No damage here. The lady in question is our Major's daughter; and, with all due respect, I commend your eye for likenesses——"

"Poor Lisa! It's rather a shame," Phyllis declared with a touch of warmth, as she moved towards the tea-table, drawing in her wake a bevy of thirsty men.

Vincent, away by the piano, was racking his brain for some plausible pretext to escape, when he discovered, with a thrill of pleasure and alarm, that Thea

Desmond had left the tea-table crowd and was coming towards him.

"We did that rather neatly, didn't we?" she said, under cover of the general talk. "And you looked most particularly innocent over there!"

The gracious act, the implied intimacy of that 'we,' brought a glow of courage to Vincent's heart. "I'm afraid I'm not so innocent as I look," he confessed frankly. "Tea-parties terrify me, and—I was meditating flight."

"Oh, but you mustn't. Father would be so disappointed."

"That's difficult to believe. Besides, what chance of any talk with him in the midst of this?"

"I don't exactly know. But he'll manage it somehow. You can always trust Father!"

Her gaze wandered to him, where he stood talking to Howard near the mantelpiece, and rested there with a brooding tenderness very beautiful to see. Vincent —just pleasantly charmed and stirred—had no mind now to run away; but, seeing himself forgotten, he continued his search for the song that haunted his brain.

With a rather sudden movement she turned to him again; and glancing up, he saw Howard looking across the room, open admiration in his eyes. But Thea Desmond was speaking, and Howard became as nothing.

"I'm so sorry. Was I rude?" she asked, with an appealing lift of her brows. "I suddenly realized that this time to-morrow he'll be gone; and it made me feel—wanting to hit out. I'm sure cousin Phyllis is a darling. But still——"

"She's splendid," Vincent said warmly. "Are you stopping long?"

"I don't know. It's all so vague. Let's sit down—shall we?—and talk comfortably."

They sat, Vincent still absently clutching his book of songs. "You see, it was this way. At Bannu, Cousin Phyllis had a sort of nursery-governess girl—a

very special treasure. And she turned out an utter fraud. Father says special treasures mostly do. And Cousin Phyllis was worried to death with it all. She doesn't like the children being too much with the natives. She's not strong, and I think he's got rather a temper. He looks like temper, doesn't he?"

Vincent nodded with conviction.

"Anyway, my Two knew things must be pretty bad for her; so Mother—in a fit of generosity—offered to lend me for a time, just to save her from plunging into another fraudulent treasure to fill the gap. I'm not sure if Father was quite so keen. He's awfully fond of Cousin Phyllis. Like a brother, almost. But then—he's *rather* fond of me. Mother calls us her Twins, because our names sort of twin and—other things too. So it was an awful wrench——" Again her eyes wandered to the soldierly figure on the hearth-rug, and for a second she compressed her lips; then went on, speaking low and rapidly as if it were a relief to unburden her heart. "I know it's horrid and selfish of me, but I'm secretly regretting Mother's fit of generosity. I wouldn't wonder if Father is too. Fits of generosity are rather dangerous things; and we have them pretty badly in our family!"

She laughed softly at her own small sally; but he caught the gleam of a tear on her lashes, and she rather abruptly changed the subject.

"What are you hugging that book for? Are you fond of those things?"

Vincent, who had almost forgotten himself, looked helplessly down at the offending volume. "I—I didn't know I was hugging it. I was only looking for one I remembered," he stammered in confusion. "Do you —sing any of them?"

"N—no, not officially—if I can help it!"

"Only to a privileged audience?" he asked, with a sinking of the heart.

She laughed and blushed. The cloud had passed from her face. "I didn't mean that! It's only that I haven't been trained much. Father preferred not;

and I mostly sing for him. He loves it so. The violin's Mother's particular joy. She's splendid on the piano; so we can play together."

"And what about—your particular joy?" Vincent ventured, with quite amazing courage. Her simplicity and candour made him almost forget that she had the misfortune to be a 'stunningly pretty girl.'

"Oh, my joy's not particular. It spreads over everything, from the organ to the big drum. Specially the big drum! It must be lovely, when you feel in a temper with every one, to go and bang it all out on a drum! You can't be properly in a temper on the fiddle. But you *can* sing to it. At least, *I* can. Just the simplest ballads and things. It's my own invention; and I'm rather proud of it.—Oh, tell me quick," she leaned suddenly nearer, "Who's this very clean boy bringing me tea? I got mixed up with all their names——"

"It's Myles, of ours," Vincent answered, cursing Jerry's 'social credit' zeal. The next moment he was standing before them, beaming genially and very clean, as Thea had said—a cup and plate in one hand, a silver muffin-dish in the other.

"Really, Vinx, you're the limit! You must excuse his bad manners, Miss Desmond. He's so absent-minded. He forgets these important trivialities unless they're thrust under his nose."

Vincent, hot and helpless, was seized with a lively desire to kick his dapper little friend.

"We'd both forgotten—hadn't we, Mr Leigh? And we weren't dying of thirst, were we?" Thea appealed to him with the engaging air of a chidden child; and Jerry's round face lengthened.

"Well, I call that downright unkind! I've brought the stuff all this way—at the serious risk of baptising my new flannels—and you practically fling it in my face!"

"But I don't, truly! Only you mustn't fling it in Mr Leigh's! For safety's sake, I'd better drink it as quickly as I can."

"Good business," said Jerry, cheering up. "Sugar?"
"Please."

He glanced at Vincent—a glance that said, "Your cue, old chap," as plain as speech. But Vincent, it seemed, was blind as dumb. He merely reached out for a carved Simla table, and Jerry, setting down his burden, went in quest of the sugar. Not to be baulked in doing a good turn, he brought his own cup back with him, set it on the piano, and proceeded to entertain 'the prettiest girl in creation'—inspired, of course, by motives of the purest concern for Vincent, whose rueful anticipations seemed likely to be fulfilled. Vincent, meantime, grew steadily more impatient of Jerry's too facile talent for playing the fool; till Jerry, in despair at his density, determined to risk everything and give him the straight tip.

"Sorry I didn't bring you any tea, old man. But I'm not a Hindu deity with arms sprouting all over the shop. If you want any, better look sharp and forage for it. Those polo chaps are tucking in like one o'clock."

And having at last caught his friend's attention, he clinched matters with a bare-faced wink.

At that the truth smote Vincent, like a bull's-eye flashed in his face, and filled him with helpless wrath. Jerry, he now perceived, was thrusting him out of his peaceful backwater in the fond delusion that he was acquiring merit, while incidentally enjoying himself down to the ground. And this sort of thing would continue. Jerry was so confoundedly zealous on his behalf; and Vincent knew by now that the slightest remonstrance would lay him open to the kind of chaff he could least tolerate, even from Myles. He would never be able to have five minutes' talk with the girl, in Jerry's presence, without the distracting under-sense that Jerry's eye was on him and Jerry's fertile brain devising schemes for his release. And all this coil sprang from an accidental lapse into friendly expansion; and the firm resolve of his heart was, 'Never again!'

Meantime he must face the ordeal of the tea-table, and only the incurably shy can appreciate the significance of those five words.

"Thanks, I'll go and take my chance," he muttered, rising abruptly; and Jerry, with an audible sigh of relief, dropped into his chair.

Round the fireplace explosions of laughter were frequent, and Vincent caught scraps of talk as he drew near. General Desmond, it seemed, was making strictly unofficial inquiries after the invalid and the nature of his sudden illness, which Howard diagnosed as a slight attack of Pifferitis, due to a deficient secretion of humour and an inordinate appetite for the *Saturday Review*.

"A disease not unknown in my time," Desmond remarked, with undisguised amusement, "though I never heard it quite so aptly named. The symptoms vary with the patient's constitution, but we mostly found cold bathing an infallible remedy!"

At this point Phyllis Eden caught Vincent's eye, and waved a welcome with her slice of cake.

"Come along," she called. "The tea-pot's *just* not empty."

He came along and received his cup, and stood there wishing to goodness he could put it down somewhere. It is the instability of tea that makes the meal such an ordeal for a shy man.

"Milk? Sugar?" she asked kindly. "Mr Myles, you've stolen the sugar!"

Jerry scurried across the room with it and scurried back in double-quick time; for Howard had risen with purpose in his eye.

Vincent, wrathfully reflecting that Jerry had also stolen his chair, secured a lump of sugar, in a rather stiff pair of tongs, with very particular care. Nervous irritation increased his natural sense of awkwardness in a crowd, and a lull in the talk made him suddenly feel as if all eyes were focussed on his trivial proceedings. At that critical moment his hand gave an involuntary jerk. The sugar skipped off on an errand of

its own; the tongs dived into his teacup; and—before Vincent could save it—the cup itself crashed on to the floor at Mrs Eden's feet.

"I—I'm awfully sorry," he muttered, and went hastily down on his knees. An impatient exclamation from Eden added the finishing touch to his misery; and while he fumbled for the pieces there was a general proffering of handkerchiefs from the men.

But Phyllis would have none of them. "Tea and tussore are almost the same colour," she said cheerfully, "and this old thing washes like a rag." Then, leaning forward, she touched Vincent's shoulder. "Don't worry over my slaughtered bazaar cup, Mr Leigh. Get up, please, and let me give you another."

"No—no, thanks," he answered, rising hurriedly. A wild desire to make a bolt of it was his one coherent thought.

Suddenly he realised that Sir Theo Desmond had come round the table and was speaking to him, while talk among the others had revived.

"You're in much better luck than *I* was, Vincent," he said kindly, "when I suffered my first social lapse. I was very new, and my victim was a rather supercilious being, dressed up to the nines. She sat next me at a dinner party, and I showed my appreciation of the honour by assisting a clumsy *kit* to christen her immaculate gown with half a dishful of mint sauce! It was an awful moment. Of course, I gallantly sacrificed my handkerchief, with the sole result that two of us, instead of one, smelt strongly of mint sauce for the rest of the evening! The infernal thing was like an albatross round my neck till I got home."

The tale raised another laugh; and Desmond, slipping a hand through the boy's arm, went on: "Look here, you know! We don't seem to have had our talk, and I'll be gone to-morrow. Come along out. It's not dark yet, and I don't suppose you're keen on teacups just at present!"

"But, Theo, he hasn't had any," Phyllis protested in distress.

"And I'll go bail he doesn't want any! If it gets too cold outside, I suppose we can trespass on your sanctum, Eden?"

Thea—with Jerry on one side of her, and Howard, leaning over the piano, on the other—managed to catch Vincent's eye before they reached the door, and her fraction of a nod said plainly, "Wasn't I right?"

CHAPTER VII.

"In the middle-aged men, who have kept their faith, lies the true courage and purpose of the world."—*The Times.*

How right she was, Vincent discovered within the next half-hour, which he spent in pacing the drive that curved round the lawn from gateway to gateway, speaking little, imbibing much. Swiftly the brief Indian twilight faded from the sky, and his own foolish perturbation subsided almost as swiftly under the spell of Sir Theo Desmond's personality and his gift of sympathetic understanding: that deeper wisdom of the heart, which enables a man to see life almost as clearly through another's eyes as through his own. For a while he kept clear of personal topics. He spoke with knowledge and enthusiasm of Indian army life, of the tribes round Kohat, and the recent signs of local irritation along the Border that, in his opinion, foreshadowded serious trouble.

"Truth is, they're in the mood to snatch at any pretext for a row," he went on, seeing how genuine interest was weaning the boy from the misery of his late discomfiture. "They don't half know what to make of our new Afghan boundary pillars, and the Mullahs know a deal too well how to play upon their suspicion of any apparent threat to their cherished independence. I'm afraid the subsidy scheme may simply result in giving 'em swelled head; and His Innocence, the Amir, is probably having a pull at the strings. Anyway the present policy's bound to

end in some sort of fireworks, sooner or later. May I have a finger in that pie! You'll never know the fine stuff your men are made of till you've seen 'em at the game they love best on earth.—I'd give something to see *you* in your first fight, Vincent. Though I imagine that, in your heart, you don't precisely look forward to that great occasion."

Vincent smiled. "I can't say I do!"

"All the same, the best I can wish for you is a taste of the real thing. Meantime, get to know your men and their language. Next to pluck and a sense of justice, these fellows appreciate nothing more keenly. Without it, you'll miss the personal touch which is the beginning and end of success in the Indian Army. You seem to have made a fair start, from what I hear."

"Well—I owe a great deal to Colonel Wyndham: and I'm keener on the language than on anything else, so far. It gives one something definite to go at, and——"

He hesitated.

"And you find the duties of a subaltern rather scrappy, eh? That's natural. You're not the regulation type. But we all have to take our turn at the odd jobs, and there's more in them than meets the eye. Don't neglect 'em—even for the language; though that's a master-key to the hidden riches of this wonderful country. You must scratch well below the surface of Indian life, Vincent, if you're to do any real good out here; and we Piffers can at least get to know one corner of the country pretty thoroughly—if we choose. You're in luck to begin with Kohat, the 'pearl in the Piffer's oyster!' I'm only sorry you're doubtful about sticking to the Service. I suppose you'll give yourself a year or two at least?"

"I think so, sir. Unless I find I'm too much of a duffer——"

"You're no duffer, my dear boy," Desmond said kindly, laying a hand on his shoulder as they walked. "But you're not built all of a piece. You complicated

folk are often slow to find your bearings; but you equally often go farthest in the end. So don't be in a violent hurry to lose heart and think you're only fit to bury your nose in a book! Give the Army a fighting chance. It's worth it. God knows we need the dreamers to save our few aspirations from dry rot. But the danger for all your sort is that you may get bitten with the modern fear of living; the worst possible fear that can paralyze a man." He paused and scanned the boy's face in the deepening dusk. "I'd like to see more of you, Vincent. I wish you had come to Murree this hot weather."

"So do I, sir," the boy said honestly. "It wasn't —altogether the work that prevented me. I—I'm such a confounded fool!"

Desmond laughed. "That's a complaint most of us suffer from at times! I guessed something of the sort. —But it's getting cold out here. Come into Eden's sanctum. I know my way about this bungalow. Lived in it myself—once upon a time."

They found the sanctum, turned up the lamp, and stood by the mantelpiece warming their feet at the blazing logs. For a while they fell silent. Vincent, stirred and stimulated, leaned an elbow on the mantelpiece and watched two small flames playing hide-and-seek under a strip of bark, while the greater ones devoured the wood. And the thought came to him that just so swiftly and inexorably was life devouring the days of his years, while he stood debating at a turn of the road.

The elder man, with his back to the fire, let his gaze wander round the room. This had been the dining-room in his time, and from every shadowed corner grey ghosts of memory stole out to greet him. But even in middle age, men of Desmond's temperament look more towards the future than the past; and very soon the little grey ghosts crept back into their corners. The sporting pictures, polo sticks, and military books of the present owner reasserted themselves and prompted his next remark.

"I'm rather sorry," he said slowly, "that you should have to work with Eden."

"So am I, sir," Vincent answered frankly. By this time all sense of *gêne* had been conjured away. "He has the knack of making me feel the biggest duffer that ever stepped."

"Bad luck. He's a decent sort, mind you, in his own fashion, and a genuine soldier: but he has about as much perception as a haystack, and his temper too easily gets out of hand. Between ourselves, I rather bar leaving my little girl under his roof. I've been wishing her brother was in the station. But I'm glad *you're* here, Vincent. You can keep a brotherly eye on her. Will you?"

"I'd be glad to do anything for you, sir," Vincent answered, not without inward trepidation as to what, precisely, 'a brotherly eye' might involve.

"Well, I shall rely on you. The child's full young to be leaving the nest; and knowing she's here to give what help she can, she mightn't like to say much, if things were difficult." He paused, and the clock on the mantelpiece caught his eye. "Lord, how the time's slipped away! And I promised her——"

As he spoke the study door opened, the heavy curtain was pushed back, and she stood on the threshold—a slim sapphire-blue figure in a long coat with a fur collar; a fur cap crowning her bright hair.

"Oh, please," she said without coming forward, "haven't you *yet* finished all your words of wisdom?"

Desmond laughed.

"I'm quite sure Vincent's had enough of 'em, anyway! Come along."

His open arms completed the invitation, and she flew into them like a child. "You did promise that we'd go out and see the moon rise over the hills," she murmured reproachfully, while Vincent, unused to such frank display of affection, became abnormally interested in the fire.

Desmond, noting the fact, lightly kissed her. "Well, there's time yet. And what about yourself, Vincent? D'you patronise the Club?"

"Not often, sir."—Thea had detached herself from Desmond, and the boy felt oddly relieved.—"I ought to have gone home long ago. My prospective Munshi must have been cooling his heels in the verandah for nearly an hour."

"While I lectured you on the importance of studying the language! Well, we'll see you home and then pay our respects to the moon."

It was a matter of five minutes' walk; and between the ghostly culverts Vincent took leave of his new friends, who had given him a lift for which he felt pathetically grateful, and of which they were not even aware.

For an appreciable time he stood looking after them, lost in thought. Then he went on to the bungalow, made a fresh engagement with a Munshi inured to the vagaries of Sahibs, wrote half a page of his letter—and got no further. His mind was too full of new impressions; and for such sensitive, inward-looking natures, vivid impressions almost rank as events.

As usual it was Jerry, whistling 'Mandalay,' who dispelled the dream.

"What ho, Vinx! Favoured of Kings and Princes! We thought Sir Theo had eloped with you. Good for your prospects. All the same, Howard and I jolly well had the best of it. My word, the General's done us a good turn!" He executed a pirouette and flung his cap in the air, deftly catching it on his racquet. "I'll play cousin for you to any extent. 'She's a daisy, she's a ducky, she's a lamb!'"

"Confound you, Jerry, you're impossible!" Vincent broke in so sharply that Jerry's face dropped half an inch. "Clear out. I want to finish my letter."

And marvelling inwardly what could have disagreed with 'old Vinx,' Jerry departed, as he had come, whistling 'Mandalay.'

Vincent had a distant glimpse of the father and

daughter next morning, when he was riding home from orderly room, as it obtains in an Indian regiment. They were cantering leisurely along the Hangu road; the girl in a brown habit on a spirited chestnut, Desmond on an Arab racer, the pick of Eden's well-filled stables. Vincent, watching them, half wished that Desmond, rather than his daughter, was remaining on at Kohat. Deep down in him there dwelt a capacity for hero-worship, that this distinguished soldier — rich in the qualities he so conspicuously lacked — had stirred into half-conscious life. As yet, he was only aware that the present looked brighter, the future more promising; and that the General was, in some way, responsible for this pleasant state of things.

The two he watched were, by this time, mere silhouettes on the dusty sunlit road; and for the moment they had almost forgotten his existence. In the shadow of parting, all lesser matters were engulfed. Thea, sometimes accused of being a chatterbox, had no flow of talk at her command. And their objective was a sad one—the Kohat cemetery, that lies along the road to the hills. The headstones mainly bear the names of British officers killed in action, or victims of cholera, fever, and other vagaries of the Indian climate. Among them, an austere marble cross bore the name of Honor Desmond's favourite brother, Colonel John Meredith—worn out, before his time, through sheer zeal in his country's service. Such men are not reckoned among the world's heroes; but the fact of their heroism remains. Desmond had promised not to leave Kohat without going to see for himself that those few feet of sacred earth were being kept up in accordance with her instructions. And there was another grave also.

At the cemetery, then, they dismounted, and left their horses in charge of a boy. They found the great white cross uprising from a bed of bronze chrysanthemums; and while Desmond had a talk with the gardener, Thea wandered on, glancing at

other names and dates; at other inscriptions, hopeful, brave, or merely resigned; at mounds pathetically neglected, or adorned by the zealous gardener in stiff geometrical designs.

"Where are they all now—where *are* they?" she wondered more acutely than she had ever wondered yet, and an aching lump rose in her throat. For to this sheltered, happy child, with glad, imperious life pulsing in her veins, death was little more than a misty and awful threat hovering on the uttermost horizon of her sun-filled world. But here, in this eloquent company of headstones, that shadow moved an appreciable step nearer; and she glanced instinctively back at her father, where he stood in the sunlight, his whole bearing an implicit challenge to the insidious assault of the years. A poignant realisation that he, too, was mortal, chilled her like a touch of steel on her flesh; and she turned hurriedly away, only to find his name confronting her on a slim headstone set in a blaze of marigolds.

Then she remembered that her mother had once spoken of an earlier marriage; another wife; but the reality had not dawned on her till now. Ghostly terrors evaporated, as with very mingled feelings she went forward and read: "Evelyn Desmond, *dearly loved Wife of* Captain Theo Desmond, V.C. *Killed*——"

Her father's step sounded close behind her, and she looked up at him, half smiling, through a mist of tears.

His own eyes were very grave and tender; and, the gardener having vanished, he slipped an arm round her, drawing her close.

"I suppose—you knew?" he asked, half under his breath.

She nodded. "Mother said something once." Her glance reverted to the headstone. "So young. Just a girl—like me."

"Yes, poor child."

Thea was silent a moment, then she whispered

without looking up: "I don't somehow seem to like it that you ever belonged — to any one else but Mother. Is it wrong — to feel that way? D'you understand?"

"I do, indeed." The pressure of his arm confirmed his words. "But Mother's a grand woman, Thea; and I'm sure it has never entered *her* head to regret those few years devoted — to another. They were great friends, you know; like sisters. But time's up, little girl. We must hurry back."

If they had not talked much going out, they talked less on the way home. Desmond, indeed, had more to say than his daughter, who was very much occupied in blinking away the tears that would come in defiance of heroic resolve. Once or twice they had the impertinence to escape beyond her lashes; then she would admire the landscape till the wind had dried her cheeks.

There was no trace of them when Desmond lifted her out of the saddle; but as the horses were led away, she caught at his hand, with the clinging clutch of a child.

"I'm *not* going to see you off in the tonga. Come and say good-bye in my room."

She led the way and he followed, not without a private twinge of rebellion in his own heart.

The situation, typical of Anglo-India, was even more typical of his wife; and none more heartily admired her unfailing readiness to help others than Desmond himself. For all that, Thea had been right in suspecting that he too was tempted to regret a 'fit of generosity' that involved the temporary banishment of this happy-natured daughter, admittedly first favourite in his family of six. It was but a year since she had rejoined them; and he had found in her companionship and fervent devotion, not merely a relief from the strain of increasing responsibility, but that renewal of his own youth, which is the guerdon of all fatherhood worthy of the name.

Phyllis's need alone would scarcely have induced him

to part with her, even for a month or two, had not his wife's arguments included some that nearly concerned the child herself. Remembering her own girlhood, Honor had a great wish that Thea should not see Indian life entirely from the standpoint of a General's daughter—and a spoilt one at that!—she, who was to marry a 'Piffer' as a matter of course; and in Phyllis Eden's dilemma she saw Thea's chance of making acquaintance with the Border and the sterner realities of Indian life. Desmond, while damning the inevitable 'Piffer,' had been fain to admit the wisdom of his wife's plea. The charge of spoiling he emphatically denied.

And it seemed there was another reason, more cogent still, in connection with a certain Colonel Parkes, a grass-widower of the type who encourages his wife to live at home, and consoles himself admirably with the misunderstood or unappreciated wives of other men. Failing one of these, he had become seriously smitten with Pindi's new beauty, the 'little Desmond girl,' whose simplicity was obviously too good to be true. Hence there had come an evening when Thea confided to her mother that Colonel Parkes was getting 'very bothersome' at dances. She didn't like his 'way of looking,' and he made uncomfortable remarks. For Honor Desmond, these childish phrases were sufficiently illuminating; and Colonel Parkes it was who had finally clinched the thorny question of Thea's visit to Kohat.

Since it was, unhappily, impossible to 'horsewhip the fellow,' Desmond had consented to let Thea go, and to see what could be done about transferring the elderly Apollo elsewhere.

And now—as he followed that adorable child of his into the room that had once been his own—it needed the thought of Colonel Parkes to quiet the disturbance within.

"There. Sit down there," she said, flinging off her hat; and gently pushing him down on to a low chair, she perched, child-fashion, on his knee.

"I want you just to christen my room, so I can feel you here—afterwards."

"I've christened this room pretty thoroughly already," he said, looking round and recognising old landmarks. "This was my '*dufter*'—in those days."

"I *am* glad!—And was it in this house you met Mother?"

"Yes. It was here."

A perceptible change in his tone checked further questioning; while he experienced, not for the first time, a keen regret that he could never speak freely of his own love story to the daughter whose demand, in place of fairy tales, had always been for 'something you did when you were young.'

Her silence smote him. Very gently he turned her face to his and kissed her with impassioned tenderness.

"Child, I *must* go," he said, rising and lifting her to her feet.

But she clung to him, keeping her face hidden. A stifled sob shook her, and she murmured in his ear: "Father, take me—take me with you!"

It was the old appeal of her childhood, and it smote the softest spot in his heart. Very gently he put her away from him and looked straight into her tear-bright eyes.

"You know you don't mean that, little girl," he said; and with a valiant effort she choked back her tears.

"N-no. I don't think—I do!"

"And I know you don't. So that settles it!"

Then with a last kiss and a fervent "God bless you," he was gone.

For a few moments she stood very still, listening to the cheerful sounds of departure outside, the clatter of the tonga, the toot of the horn. For a few moments something very like anger flamed in her heart: anger against the wise mother who had laid this first burden on her shoulders, when all she

asked was to live in her father's pocket and be happy in her own way. Then, as the last murmur of hoofs and wheels died away, loneliness overwhelmed her like a flood let loose. With shaking hands she bolted her door, flung herself on the bed and cried her heart out.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Our deeds determine us as much as we determine our deeds."—GEORGE ELIOT.

THREE weeks later she sat at her dressing-table in a blue silk kimono starred with flying cranes, her loosened hair rippling to her waist like a shower of beech leaves in October. Thick and crisp and rippled with the faintest natural wave, it seemed, like her mother's hair, to possess a vitality of its own; and Thea frankly loved it, frankly regretted that young ladyhood involved hairpins and seemly coils. She compromised matters by a sparing use of the former; sometimes, as this morning, with disastrous results.

She had been out for her usual scamper before breakfast, and a final gallop round the circular road had sent her few pins flying to the four winds. With her hair streaming out like a bright banner she had sped on, and dashing recklessly round the Mall turning had only just escaped collision with Mr Leigh. She smiled at the remembrance of his surprise and embarrassment when she greeted him with a laughing explanation that she hadn't taken leave of her senses, but only of some tortoise-shell hairpins; and if he happened to see any, she would be glad to have them back.

Now Mr Myles—she called him the Pocket Cherub—would have enjoyed the joke, and would certainly have admired her hair. She doubted whether Mr Leigh had dared even to notice it; and he wouldn't get such a chance again in a hurry. It must be very

awkward, she reflected, patting loose coils into shape, to be so easily put out of countenance. It made him rather difficult, almost irritating, when she was in one of her impatient moods. But in between she found him distinctly likeable, if enigmatic. She approved his figure and the poise of his head, that made Lisa Williams call him the Superior Person. She liked his trick of raising one eyebrow, his still queerer trick of bungling over the first person singular, and the light that lurked in his serious eyes. Above all, she liked his face when he was listening to music. It was as if a veil had slipped from it; but no sooner did the music stop than the veil was there again. Perhaps the change was merely her own fancy. She wanted to know. Some day, perhaps, she would ask the Pocket Cherub to keep a look-out and privately record his observations. In *his* company she felt entirely at home. The only puzzling point about him was his evident affection for Mr Leigh, with whom he could scarcely have two ideas in common. It had amused her, latterly, to speculate how long she and Mr Leigh could be together without being joined by Mr Myles. She decided that it might be interesting to draw him out on the subject one of these days.

She had inherited a large measure of her mother's interest in people for their own sakes: and to that heritage, as much as to her eager, outward-going nature, she owed it that these first few weeks in a strange home and a strange land had proved not quite so desolate as in anticipation. Yet, deep in her heart, the ache was there. Only yesterday it had been so bad that she had sat up till near midnight pouring out, to that dear and distant father, her sudden yearning for the happy harmonious atmosphere of home. Here discord seemed always in the air. Even when the volcano was not in active eruption, there remained the feeling that one must go cautiously as upon a crater's edge. It was her first experience of the nerve-wracking sense of insecurity that pervades a household dominated by moods and tempers: and all the while her sensitive

nature was aware of underlying strain, of worries and difficulties that no zeal of hers could alleviate or dispel.

Phyllis—no longer 'Cousin Phyllis'—she already adored with the ardour of nineteen *plus* the Desmond temperament, that could do nothing by halves; and the children, though rather out of hand, were fitfully responsive to her attempts at teaching. Eden was the fly, or rather the bluebottle, in the honey-pot; but of him she had said little in her letter, that should be finished and posted after breakfast.

While she was fastening her blouse, there came from the back verandah sounds of human thunder, with which she was beginning to grow familiar; sounds that still awakened a vague touch of fear and a more definite touch of contempt. For she had been reared in an atmosphere of self-control. Her own hot-headed father, though liable to explosions, had never spoken roughly to his wife or children; and the first time she heard Eden 'confound' Phyllis she had come dangerously near to flashing out her young chivalrous scorn. But the education of Captain Eden was no part of her business here; though in irate moments she ventured to think he needed it even more than the children themselves.

This morning she felt peculiarly irate. Fresh from the exhilaration of her ride, the world seemed more than ever beautiful and desirable. Why was everything to be spoilt by disagreeable people who could not curb their tongues?

As she buckled her belt, the eruption—that had begun in the verandah—passed on into the dining-room, and she foresaw one of those uncomfortable meals when no one said anything and you didn't know where to look. The dining-room door was ajar, and the flow of wrath took shape as she crossed the hall, where instinctively she paused, fearing to intrude at an awkward moment.

There had been a brief interlude in quavering tones from Phil. But she only caught the final appeal: "I

forgot, Mummy, truly I did;" an appeal that provoked a fresh burst of parental thunder.

"Shut up and stop that whimpering, you cheeky little beggar. Nice way you rear your son."—This evidently to Phyllis—"First he steals my scissors and breaks the tip. Then he lies about it; and when he's brought to book he goes whining to you with another lie, because he knows you'll take it all for gospel truth. He's too old for this country and too much with the servants. Sooner he's packed off home the better. And I warn you if I catch him lying again he'll get the thrashing he deserves——"

Here Phyllis intervened with a touch of heat. "Ted—Thea will be coming in a minute!"

"Oh, confound the girl!" Thea's cheeks flamed. "I suppose I can say what I choose in my own house, even if you do choke it up with your relations."

"Ted—please!——"

There was no time for more. Thea, feeling suddenly guilty of overhearing, hurried forward, resolved to strengthen her appeal of the night before.

To Eden's gruff "Good morning!" she returned a perfunctory greeting; kissed Phyllis fervently, and sat down between the children with a challenging lift of her head, intended to signify that this human volcano might 'erupt' over his own family, but not over her.

Phyllis, frail at the best of times, looked frailer than ever. The veil that shadowed her face seemed now more like a delicate mask, and her shining eyes had no softness. Thea fancied she caught a gleam in them like the flicker of a hidden flame.

The silence, following on the storm, was heavy with things unspeakable. The clink of knives and forks, and Flop's audible appreciation of her food, grew oppressively conspicuous. The 'uncomfortable meal' was upon them with a vengeance: one of the worst she had yet known.

Eden emptied the sausage dish with muttered grumblings addressed to no one in particular. Flop,

unperturbed by the familiar domestic drama, munched toast and marmalade, leaving most of the latter on her cheeks, and gazed solemnly at Eden as though he were a conjuror with more tricks up his sleeve. Phil gulped spoonfuls of porridge diluted with tears; and Thea's one attempt at conversation with Phyllis failed lamentably.

"Darling, you *should* have come out this morning," she said with forced lightness. "I had the loveliest ride. At the end my hair fell down, and of course I promptly charged into Mr Leigh and startled him out of his life."

"Poor Mr Leigh!" Phyllis murmured dutifully; and to Thea's dismay Eden struck in: "It 'ud take less than that to scarify young Leigh. We'll never make a soldier out of *him*."

"I think you are unjust to the boy," his wife remarked in a repressed voice.

"Precisely what you *would* think," he snapped back at her. "And of course you know a lot more about it than I do."

Thea, heartily wishing she had held her tongue, confined her attention to her own plate till Eden noisily pushed back his chair—and the ordeal was over.

"Don't wait tiffin," he said as he went out: "I shall have it at Mess."

And Thea was afraid Phyllis must have heard her irrepressible sigh of relief. But Phyllis seemed disconcertingly unaware of any one's presence till a timid hand plucked at her sleeve. She started and looked down at her son, and all in a moment the frozen mask was gone.

"Mummy, I did almost—very *nearly* forget about the scissors," he murmured, manfully choking back his tears. "And Daddy was so wangry, he made me forget more——"

Those broken phrases put the whole case in a nutshell; and Phyllis Eden smiled as she shook her head in a vain effort to look stern.

"Don't forget another time, Flip," she said. "Taking the scissors wasn't half so bad as saying you didn't take them. A real man owns up to things, even if he's frightened."

"Flop 'membered. Flop not f'ightened," that young lady interjected pharisaically with her mouth full.

"'Course not. You didn' *do* it," Phil flung back at her.

"Listen to me, Flip," the quiet voice went on. "If you don't own up to things like a man you'll make Daddy more more 'wangry' and you'll make Mother terribly unhappy."

"Oh, I won't, Mummy, I won't!" he sobbed, and fell upon her breast in a storm of tears.

And she just held him there, till the storm had subsided. Then she kissed him and bade him take Flop out for a run till it was time for lessons. That sufficed. The horizon was clear again and he scampered off, dragging in his wake the pharisaical Flop.

Then Phyllis sank rather suddenly into a chair by the fire, and Thea could contain herself no longer. "Darling, it's a shame! I can't help it, I'm simply bursting!" she murmured vehemently, and kneeling down by the chair she slipped an arm round her cousin's waist.

If Phyllis made small response, it was not for lack of very real response within; but simply because the fervent worship of nineteen for thirty must needs be kept in check for the soul's good of nineteen. She said nothing, however; and Thea continued to overflow.

"I heard him—in the hall. And it made me furious. How *dare* he—even if he is your husband!"

But Phyllis, stiffening a little, said quietly: "That's no affair of yours, child. And you know a lot about husbands, don't you?"

"Well, I *do* know some," Nineteen answered stoutly. "Uncle Howard and Uncle Verny and Father."

"A very representative trio! If all men, or even half of them, were like Theo and your mother's brothers, the world would be turned upside down. It's not fair to judge the average husband by their standard."

"Well, I hope *I* shan't marry the average husband, if it means he can hector you and say all the horrid things he pleases——"

"Be quiet, Thea!" Phyllis commanded with an odd flash in her eyes. "I know you don't mean to be impertinent, but——"

Thea knelt upright, her cheeks aflame. "Oh, how *can* you! I never meant it that way. But it hurts me so to see you worried to death and I can't do anything to help."

"You are helping me all the time, dear. Only—on certain subjects you must learn to held your tongue."

"Very well. I'll try. But you don't *know* how hard it is——"

"I do know," Phyllis admitted with unguarded emphasis, and abruptly changed the subject. "I must go now. The khansamah's waiting."

Thea sprang to her feet. "Let *me* do the khansamah and the go-down—please."

"No, no. It's my work."

The girl's face fell.

"I believe you say 'No' on principle. I wonder Captain Eden ever got you to marry him. I'm sure you said 'No' half a dozen times first."

"Quite likely!" Phyllis answered with her eyes on the fire. "I didn't keep count!"

"Then it was probably a dozen, you aggravating angel! And I suppose, at last, you had to say 'Yes' for a change? So you might, for once, say it to me. Fooling round with the babies is all very well. But there's lots more I could do for *you*, yourself——"

"You do a deal more than you can realize, Thea—simply by being here," Phyllis answered with a grave tenderness that carried conviction. "But we mustn't

waste half the morning talking. There's masses of needlework to get through."

"Well, let's tackle it together, and give Flip a holiday. And I'm simply going to do the khansamah without asking leave. You look so tired,—so ill!"

Sudden fear clutched her heart; for while she spoke Phyllis had changed colour and swayed as if she would fall forward. But now she sat rigid, gripping the arm of her chair.

"What nonsense, child! I'm never ill. It's a luxury—I can't afford——"

Her voice trailed off, her grip relaxed, and with a sobbing catch of the breath she fell backward in a dead faint.

Never yet had Thea beheld death's counterfeit; and for one staggering moment she believed that Phyllis —brave, beautiful Phyllis—was gone past recall. Half frantic with distress she ran into the back verandah, where Moti, ayah, sat chewing *betel* and gossiping with the *durzi*, quite unmindful of her charges.

"Oh, ayah, come quick," Thea called. "The Mem-Sahib! Keep the *Baba-log* away!"

"*Hai-hai! Meri maya!*" Moti lamented, and skilfully shot a mouthful of blood-red saliva clear of the verandah's edge. Then she hurried forward, her unconfined plumpness quivering like a blanc-mange.

"Have no fear, Missy Sahib. The Mem sometimes has this kind of *bimari*.[1] A little brandy and rubbing —that is all the need."

And it was so.

With a long slow sigh Phyllis at last opened her eyes and smiled in a vague, dazed fashion.

"How stupid of me! What was I saying?"

Thea, stooping, kissed her forehead that was moist with eau de Cologne.

"You said you were never ill—and then you fainted dead away and frightened me out of my life!"

"That was rather inconsistent!" She took up the hand that rested on her shoulder and laid it against

[1] Illness.

her cheek. "There's nothing to be frightened about, dear. I'm a little overtired; but I can't stand being fussed over. So you mustn't speak of this, please, to Ted—or any one. D'you understand?"

"No, I don't! I'm sure it's all wrong for you to go fainting about like this and telling nobody."

"That's my own affair." Phyllis, quite herself again, sat upright now and squarely faced this rebellious and loveable girl. "Just promise, please, to do what I ask."

"Oh dear, oh *dear!*" sighed Thea between resignation and despair. "All right, I promise." Suddenly her face lit up. "Anyway, you won't squash *all* my offers of help now,—will you?"

She was irresistible with her young championship and devotion and the spirit of Theo Desmond shining out of her hazel-grey eyes. Impulsively Phyllis drew her forward and kissed her; and Thea received that kiss with a curious stillness which belied the emotion within.

"Well, Flip shall have his holiday. Will that satisfy you?" Phyllis asked, wondering at her quietness. "But we really must get started, child. The *tikka durzi* will be here soon clamouring for those 'Creatures of Impulse' costumes."

Thea shook a small, wise head.

"As if you weren't swamped already with your own clothes *and* the children's! Why on earth can't that Mungoose girl do her own frock?"

"Because the result would make poor Mr Howard tear his hair!" Phyllis answered lightly, unrolling a length of blue sateen. "He must have everything up to the mark, or he'll throw it all overboard, without compunction. He's acted a lot in Simla; and he's really too keen and critical to wrestle with average amateurs. But he has a wonderful knack of making them do what he wants in the end."

Thea, who was cutting up an old shirt of Phil's for a pattern, nodded feelingly. "I wish he hadn't 'knacked' me into promising I'd sing. I did refuse

first, and I don't know now why I ever said 'Yes.' But I don't think even you could easily say 'No' to Mr Howard!"

"Not very easily," Phyllis admitted with her mouth full of pins. "Luckily he doesn't often tackle me.—I shall have to use you for a dummy, Thea."

"Did he tackle you over these dresses?"

"Perhaps he did! He knows I'm a practised hand." Phyllis was rapidly plying her scissors now; and for a time the two were silent, thinking their own thoughts. Thea, after vain speculations about that fainting fit, found her mind chiefly occupied with the coming theatricals, and the wonder, tinged with alarm, at having been chosen by Mr Howard to play leading lady in Gilbert's old extravaganza "Creatures of Impulse." Indeed, the whole project had sprung from a chance confession that she loved acting and had taken a small part at Pindi last cold weather.

That had been three or four days ago at an impromptu "Cinderella" in the Garrison Mess: and before the dance was over, everything had been arranged to Howard's immense satisfaction.

That evening glowed in Thea's memory as one of the happiest she had known since leaving home. Dancing was, for her, a joy that bordered on ecstasy, when partner, mood, and music were all in accord: and in Howard she had discovered the one partner comparable to her father. The discovery, it seemed, had been mutual. Out of a dozen dances and two extras Howard had managed, quite casually, to secure five. He had also managed to make a definite impression on Thea's eternally interested brain. The mere fact that she—who had never known shyness—felt at times unaccountably shy with this one man, seemed to set him apart from the rest. It also made her feel a little nervous of acting with him: yet in spite of that, perhaps because of it, she wanted to act with him more than she had wanted anything for a long while.

"Now then, Thea," Phyllis said at last, holding up

the scaffolding of Pipette's blue gown. "Come and suffer for to be beautiful! If I've got this right it can go to fill the maw of that all-devouring *durzi*."

With an air of mock resignation, Thea slipped off her frock; and the ordeal was in full swing—snipping, slashing, pinning—when the 'kit' announced in sepulchral tones: "Willims Mem-Sahib!"

Phyllis flung down her scissors with a sigh of exasperation. "What on *earth* can they want? They were only here on Wednesday. There are certain people in India, Thea, who seem to spend the whole of calling-time driving round and persecuting hapless folk, like myself, who are eternally chasing a lost half hour and never catching it."

"Poor darling!" Thea's finger-tips caressed the shapely hand that lay on the table. "Why not say *durwaza bund?*"

"I do. But one can't say it perpetually to one's own regiment. *Salaam dó*," she added in parenthesis.

"Well, if you could be a wee bit rude, or bored, sometimes, it might choke them off."

Phyllis smiled. "I'm afraid it would take a large chunk of rudeness to choke off dear, good-hearted, tactless Mrs Williams. Will *you* be a wee bit rude this morning, child, and show me how it's done?"

"Oh, Phyllis! But I don't know how to be."

"Exactly. You and I aren't made that way, so the other kind have the pull over us. And here they are!"

Mrs Williams was a short woman, whose exuberance defied artificial compression, and whose round eyes radiated good-nature, unsalted by a grain of humour. At this moment they also radiated a triumphant sense of having stepped, so to speak, straight from an Oxford Street emporium into Phyllis Eden's untidy dining-room, littered with bricks, reels, paper patterns, and Thea's discarded garments.

Dress, hat, and parasol, in an assertive shade of purple, were obviously 'the latest' from Home; as also was the rather pronounced coat and skirt of her step-daughter, the 'Mungoose girl,' whose neutral-tinted

hair, restless eyes, and front teeth of the rodent type, justified a name that had 'caught on,' as nicknames do in India. Thea decided that the precious garments must have arrived that very morning. They exhaled such unmistakable whiffs of the packing-case; and their aggressive newness advertised the real reason of the Williams' call. Nominally they had come to discuss "Creatures of Impulse," and the prospective Bachelors' Dance; actually they were on tour to parade these new possessions in the hope of extracting comments and arousing feminine envy.

At sight of them Phyllis flushed slightly, and flicked a few cotton threads off her own well-worn tweed of the winter before last.

"You must excuse us," she said with a comprehensive wave of her hand. "If I'd known it was a visit of ceremony, we'd have received you properly in the drawing-room."

"I'm very glad you didn't, my dear," cooed the plump, purple intruder, accepting the speech as a tribute to her gown. "It feels much more cosy and friendly in here, all among the patterns and the snippets and things; and this is *such* a comfortable chair."

She perched, with nervous care, on the edge of its vast depth; and ostentatiously thrust out the handle of her parasol, that culminated in a flamboyant macaw. But Phyllis, leaning against the mantelpiece, was shifting a log with her foot; and Thea, who seldom missed the byplay of life, chuckled inwardly.

She herself, with bare neck and arms, and a good deal of ankle in evidence, felt conspicuously unfinished and unclothed in the company of callers so scrupulously gloved and veiled and parasoled. But she did not choose that a Mungoose, flaunting the spoils of Oxford Street, should put her out of countenance. So she perched, half sitting, on the table, and swung a shapely foot, while Lisa—whose real name was Lizzy—discoursed of her new evening dress, and of her own small part in the piece, which she thanked her stars was no bigger. It was no joke acting with Mr Howard. He

was so awfully critical. He didn't care a straw what he said nor who he said it to, and she wouldn't be in Miss Desmond's shoes for anything on earth.

Miss Desmond, suspecting that the grapes were sour, listened serenely to tales of Howard's unspeakable remarks at rehearsals, while she managed to keep an amused ear open for the burbling of Mrs Williams, whose talk was as effortless and almost as monotonous as the purring of a cat.

Phyllis allowed that innocuous purring to flow on almost without interruption. The relentless whisper of her Bee clock was louder in her ears than her guest's rambling discourse on bazaar prices and the slackness of the Kohat library in procuring new novels.

At last, perhaps by some telepathic influence, Mrs Williams also became aware of the clock.

"Good gracious!" she cried. "Nearly a quarter to one! And we've three more calls to pay before tiffin!" She stood up, smoothed away the suspicion of a crease, and held out a tightly-gloved hand. "I believe you're longing to get back to your scissors and snippets, you extraordinary person! I'm sure it's a mercy you *have* a few idle friends to come and interrupt, or you'd work yourself into your grave! Of *course*, you'll be at the polo this afternoon. Come along, my dear, before poor Miss Desmond catches her death of cold. What's that about Mr Leigh? *Such* a nice creature, but *so* queer! I told him yesterday he's as bad as that gentleman who lived in a tub—Cerberus, wasn't it? Or Agamemnon? I never *can* remember these Latin names."

"I rather think it was Diogenes," Phyllis suggested, smiling.

"Yes, yes. That's what I meant. And a soldier *can't* live in a tub. It's not the thing. You two girls must manage to drag him out of it somehow."

At that Lisa drew herself up with a slight pursing of her thin lips. "I don't need any assistance, thank you, Mama. I was just telling Miss Desmond I mean to make him take a part in this piece——"

"And I've bet her a whole rupee she won't succeed!" Thea interposed, laughing; but Miss Williams failed to see the joke.

"I believe I know him *rather* better than you do," she retorted, as she followed her step-mother out of the room.

"Thank Heaven!" Phyllis breathed fervently when they were alone. "Poor Lisa. Planning to lure Cerberus out of his tub with the help of that unspeakable costume! The latest joined is always her special property till he drifts elsewhere; but as I believe Mr Leigh has private means, he may find the drifting process a little difficult. It's rather a pitiable state of things. Now, child, prepare to be pricked and snipped without mercy. I'm not going to utter a superfluous syllable till tiffin-time!"

She proved nearly as good as her word; and when at two o'clock the table-cloth and plate-basket drove them into the drawing-room, she sank into Eden's chair with a sigh of utter weariness that could not be repressed. There was no colour in her cheeks; very little in her lips; and Thea stood looking down at her, a tense, controlled expression on her face.

"Phyllis, please, will you—just once in a way—lie down after tiffin? Captain Eden's not here. *Will* you?"

Phyllis smiled not quite steadily. "Persistent child!" she said. "Just once in a way—I think I will."

Thea, lifted beyond speech, stooped and kissed her and went quietly out of the room.

Standing before her looking-glass, tidying her rebellious hair, she suddenly remembered the letter to her father. Did she intend to finish it now?

There were nearly two sheets of it; and glancing through them she marvelled why yesterday seemed so curiously remote. The ache of longing was undiminished. But somehow 'things' were different; and the Thea, who stood there hesitating, was not quite the same Thea who had dashed home with her

hair down only a few hours ago. In face of the morning's events, she could no longer regard herself as a rather insignificant item in an uncomfortable household. She knew now that this household was more than uncomfortable; and she had Phyllis' word for it, sealed by the wonder of that unexpected kiss, that her mere presence was a help.

The vague, haunting sense of tragedy in the background fired her chivalrous spirit, and put hesitation to flight. With a small sigh she tore the offending letter across and across, flung away the shreds, and went in to tiffin.

CHAPTER IX.

"Diffidence, as an obstacle to ease, has its place among the causes of strong character . . . and in the insistence of a soul under discomfiture there is evidence of a moral strength that is its own reward."—COMPTON LEITH.

ON that same afternoon Vincent Leigh—unaware of designs upon his peace of mind—was pacing his back verandah deep in talk with Subadar Afzul Khan, an Afridi from the highlands of Tirah, and one of the most distinguished Indian officers in the regiment. A deadly marksman, agile and bloodthirsty as a panther, with the eye of a hawk and the genial braggadocio of a Gascon, Afzul Khan was an Afridi of the Afridis, which is to say a fragment of the finest fighting material that the Indian borderland can produce. In his own highlands this man was still true to type: treacherous, vengeful, and implacable as Fate. Here, in the ordered atmosphere of cantonments, discipline, tradition, and the influence of the British officer had transformed him into a shrewd yet straightforward soldier, of unshakeable loyalty to the Sirkar, whose uniform he had worn for close on twenty years. Border regiments are full of such anomalies, which may well be reckoned amongst India's most genuine tributes to the righteousness of British rule.

In pursuance of Desmond's advice, Vincent had cultivated closer acquaintance with his Subadar, to their mutual satisfaction. On the surface there seemed little affinity between the scholarly young Englishman, with his temperamental remoteness from the starker

crudities of life, and this half-disciplined savage, whose highest realities were his weapons of slaughter and his rough tribal code of honour that knew no blacker shame than injury unavenged, no prouder badge than a blade steeped in blood. But Vincent's study of the language included the wider study of Border ethnology. He found in the jovial Afridi a mine of queer tales and information not to be gleaned from his more literate Munshi or from Jerry's intelligent Sikh Havildar, Govin Singh; and by now, with Afzul's smattering of English, they could achieve very friendly intercourse of a sort.

In the main it was Afzul who did the talking; and to-day he was full of a strange happening possible only on the North-West Frontier.

That morning there had entered the Sikh lines a scarecrow of a man asking direction to the hut of Sirdar Afzul Khan. There he had introduced himself as a fellow-clansman, one Fuzl Ali Khan, now in such desperate straits—by reason of the inevitable blood feud—that he had secretly fled over the Border into the sanctuary of a British cantonment.

"For the space of four months—true talk, Sahib—this my friend was held prisoner in the uppermost room of his village tower by three brothers, sons of Shaitan, who kept so strict a watch that none of his family could venture near the tower to bring food, lest a corpse the more be added to the enemy. For thus we reckon our blood feuds. Only when there is equal counting, corpse for corpse, can either side make an end without loss of honour; and those devil-brothers are still five corpses ahead. Last week, by the mercy of Allah and his own cunning, Fuzl Ali escaped secretly and crept hither. But a man may tell every bone in his body, and his skin is as that of a babe not yet ripened by the sun. He desires the White Queen's service; and although the Colonel Sahib's countenance was not favourable, in the end I prevailed. Great is the Colonel Sahib's understanding of the Afridi people. At first I feared some trouble with

Fuzl Ali, on account of signing for three years. Yet once again I prevailed. He hath signed as required."

"And—will he stay?"

"He will stay while I have power to hold him. But when strength returns there may come a word from Tirah that will draw him back as the sun is drawn to earth at evening. For the command of the blood feud is above all."

"You are a queer folk," Vincent mused, regarding the vigorous profile outlined against the verandah wall. "For all your boasted independence, you are shackled by this tyrannical law of vengeance, and swayed by your Mullahs as completely as the plains folk are by their Rajahs and Nawabs."

"*Nahin*, Sahib! Not the Afridi devils of Tirah!" cried the Subadar hotly; and proceeded to confirm his denial by a graphic tale of the manner in which his tribe had come by their first *ziarut*[1]; a tale bearing the authentic stamp of Afridi treachery and Afridi cunning. He appeared to take some pride in the fact that none among the tribes had a worse repute in the matter of religious observances than his own; so that, at one time, no Mullah dare so much as set foot within their borders. Shrineless and priestless, the Afridis became a derision among the orthodox; till certain of their Maliks thought well to invite a Mullah from Peshawur that they might discover for themselves whether the game of piety were worth the candle or no. The guileless holy man, eager for converts, came upon their invitation; and there flocked to his pulpit robbers and cut-throats aflame with curiosity rather than zeal. So eloquent was their guest and so complete their conviction, that they resolved, straight away, to wipe out their own reproach in respect of the indispensable shrine; and what saint better fitted for honourable sacrifice than he whom God Himself had plainly sent from Peshawur for their salvation?

"Great heavens!" cried Vincent at this point, "have you people *no* shame?"

[1] Shrine.

An odd light flashed in the Afridi's eyes. "The Sahib mistakes. It is a matter of race——"

"As your tale bears witness! And the martyr, expressly sent by Allah — was he consulted in the matter?"

"There is no record of consultation," the Subadar answered gravely. "And consider, Hazúr, the reward of his zeal. He, that would have rotted under a pile of stones, died honourably by the sword; and above his bones there arose the first shrine of the Tirah."

Vincent smiled. "No doubt after death he perceived his good fortune!"

"True talk, Sahib. — But I am exhausting your Honour's patience, and I am promised at the polo ground to witness the sure defeat of the *Rissalar*[1] team! I have leave to depart?"

Vincent gave the formal permission; then, the Subadar being gone, he lit his pipe and continued his stroll.

The bungalow, bereft of Jerry, was a haven of silence. Vincent could distinctly hear the voices of Howard and Maclean in the next compound, divided from his own by a low wall and a few dusty bushes of oleander and hybiscus. They were evidently starting for polo, and their talk was interspersed by Maclean's hearty guffaw.

How cheerfully and serenely those two accepted this their life, with its eternal round of duty and sport, of ambitions and jealousies; varied, Vincent supposed, by incursions of the inescapable feminine; though it was difficult to imagine either of them seriously in love. For them no hampering doubts, no bewildering sense of life's complexities, such as impelled Vincent to question and probe his importunate soul before he could come to terms with his fellows or his profession. His was the privilege, or the curse, of the poetic temper, that is always too vividly aware of life's vast rhythmic progression, whether revealed in the human panorama or in the march of sun and

[1] Cavalry.

stars, to be able to live it simply and unconsciously, like those more masculine spirits, whose capacity in this line filled him with mingled envy and respect.

Most of all he envied, in lonely moments, the friendship that could link two such opposites as Howard and Maclean. One rarely met them apart; and Jerry, in an inspired moment, had prophesied that they would eventually marry one another's fiancées by way of crowning proof that they had 'all things common.'

What was fundamentally wrong with himself that, for him, genuine friendship seemed an impossibility? With Paul Desmond, did Fate permit, the thing might be: and meantime he was aware of being drawn into a relation with Paul Desmond's sister which he would certainly not have deemed conceivable three weeks ago. Encouraged by Mrs Eden, they had ridden together once or twice; and alone with her, by virtue of her simplicity and directness, he could be more nearly himself than with any other of her kind. Inevitably Jerry had given a certain amount of trouble; but, Jerry or no, there was beginning to dawn on him the possibility of an ideal relation with this glad-hearted girl, who scattered her radiance impartially on man, woman, and child: a relation compact of service and worship on his part, and tacit acceptance on hers. It was characteristic of his odd remoteness from actuality that he looked for nothing beyond that unspoken permission so to worship and to serve.

To-day he would see her at the polo, and with any luck they might ride home together. But he was still hopelessly at the mercy of chance or of more purposeful humans in such matters; and lately he had been puzzled, even a little annoyed, at finding himself more than once involved in an entirely unsought *tête-à-tête* with Miss Williams. It was this kind of thing that made women so bewildering, and social experiments so full of pitfalls for his unwary feet. But to-day he was in a hopeful mood; and hope generated impatience. It was growing late; but he had promised to ride down

with Mayne, who by now had adapted himself, in a measure, to soldierly idiosyncrasies, and had also fulfilled Jerry's prophecy as regards Howard and Maclean. The indefatigable pair had even induced him to appear as a villager in their musical farce.

Vincent himself had been completely taken aback by a suggestion from Howard that he should try his hand at the part of 'Peter, a young farmer,' on the score that rehearsals would prove an infallible cure for his complaint. Regarding it as a piece of friendly sarcasm he had refused point-blank, though not without a quite unreasonable twinge of regret. He was wondering now, had he again flung away an irrecoverable chance, when there came a clatter of hoofs followed by the arrival of Mayne; and they rode off too rapidly for much talk by the way.

They reached the polo ground to find the match well advanced and the Sikhs one goal to the good.

Riders, horses, and polo sticks were apparently tying themselves into knots over an invisible ball; while Vincent and Mayne, skirting the crowd, made their way towards the end of the ground reserved for the officers and ladies of the station. A group of men, near the tea-table, were exchanging bets about the result; and, as Howard emerged from the tangle in command of the ball, excitement ran high among officers and men.

Vincent found his attention wandering reprehensibly from the tangle of horses and men to the group gathered round Mrs Finlay, Mrs Eden, and Miss Desmond. Why on earth could he not walk up and join them all, as Jerry had already done, and as Howard would not fail to do the moment he dismounted?

Suddenly he was aware of the rather flat, penetrating voice of Miss Williams, speaking his name. He started visibly. That voice was beginning to get on his nerves.

"*So* sorry!" she apologised playfully. "I thought you saw me. People don't generally fall into brown studies when their regiment is winning a polo match.

At least—not *ordinary* people! Is it any use offering a penny for your thoughts?"

"I—I—really don't know," Vincent muttered vaguely, his eyes following the scrimmage near the cavalry goal-posts. "I should say they weren't worth a halfpenny—to any one except myself."

But Miss Williams, with a purpose to achieve, was not so easily disconcerted.

"Please don't pretend to be cynical with *me!* And don't overdo the modesty touch. It's an awful mistake, really; though I believe it's half laziness. Simply that you won't be bothered. And isn't there something in the Bible about talents under bushels? I bet you could play tennis and dance as well as any of them, if you'd *only* let me start you with some lessons. And there's Mr Howard seems to think you can act. I hear he's offering you a part."

Vincent, irritated beyond endurance, faced her squarely. "Well, Howard's quite mistaken. I've no intention of acting—and he knows it."

For the space of a moment she was discomfited. Then: "Poor Mr Howard!" she sighed, deftly tacking sail. "He's *so* energetic, and it's awfully discouraging when people won't play up. In these little shows it really doesn't matter a hang if you can act well or not. *I* can't. But rehearsals are quite good fun; and out here one *must* be public-spirited and help to make things go."

"So I have been incessantly told since I arrived," Vincent answered, his patience fairly at an end. "But I'm afraid I fail to see how a public exhibition of incompetence can help to make anything 'go'!"

The minute the words were out he realized their ungraciousness, and blundered hastily from bad to worse. "I—of course I was speaking for myself." But the girl reddened furiously and drew herself up with a snap of the lips.

At that moment, to his intense relief, an outburst of cheering and clapping announced the end of all things, and victory to the Sikhs. Jerry rushed up, a

whirlwind of excitement, and Miss Williams pointedly turned the light of her countenance upon his friend.

Free at last, he took firm hold of his courage, basely deserted Jerry, and drifted towards the Eden group. But the players were before him. Blake had secured Mrs Eden, and Howard, leaning over Miss Desmond, his hand on the back of her chair, was evidently receiving congratulations with a full consciousness of his own deserts. His eyes, that had no softness in them, were curiously intent, and they never left the girl's face. Yet she still went on laughing and talking with that enviable ease of hers; and Vincent wondered, in his innocence, whether that was the sort of thing girls and women really liked. If so, his own chance of winning their favour was obviously past praying for.

Suddenly, from the Sikh refreshment tent, some one shouted for Howard, and with a frown of unconcealed impatience he hurried away, followed at once by Maclean.

Thea, looking round as they went, caught Vincent's eye; and fearful of being thwarted again, he fairly charged towards her. She greeted him with a friendly smile and an amused lift of her brows.

"A great fight, wasn't it?" she said. "Mr Howard was splendid. Aren't you bursting with pride?"

Too candid to feign the correct pitch of enthusiasm, he hesitated, and she added with a mischievous twinkle: "Perhaps you didn't even notice which side won?"

"I'm not quite so bad as that," he murmured reproachfully; "it's only—I somehow can't get myself up to the bursting point on these occasions. Polo's a wonderful game; and in the excitement of it I'm afraid I often forget about sides altogether." A general stir in the shamianah impelled him to a desperate venture, lest Howard reappear.

"Couldn't we—I mean—if you're starting now, may I—do let me ride home with you?"

"Certainly," she answered, half amused. "Come along. We'll give them a lead!"

She stood up, very erect and slender in her covert coat and brown habit, the skirt just lifted to display the smallest, neatest riding-boot imaginable. At least so it seemed to Vincent, who had never noticed a woman's riding-boot till that moment.

Following her out of the tent, he marvelled at his own good fortune; dreaded lest, even now, it should be snatched from his grasp.

But mercifully Jerry was occupied in the glorification of Howard; and Miss Williams, still hovering near the tea-table, was firmly secured by the most incorrigible bore in the station. To Thea's friendly greeting she returned a frigid nod. Vincent she pointedly ignored.

"Very odd girl, the Mungoose," Thea remarked as Vincent came up with her. "I can't make out the inside machinery of people like that."

She did not know — how should she? — that the Mungoose had intended to ride home with Mr Leigh herself; nor could she realise, even remotely, the jaundiced mental outlook of those unfavoured ones who must either scheme for masculine society or go without.

Once outside the tent they were safe; and having achieved one bold request Vincent ventured another. "Can you trust me—to put you up?"

"Would it be a very serious risk?" she asked, dimpling. "Is that one of the things you've never done?"

"Never in my life."

"Sure you won't land me over the other side?"

He frowned. "If you're determined to make me nervous I—I won't try."

"Oh yes—please."

For three seconds that miracle of a boot rested on his hand—then it was gone. His uplift had come half a second too late, and she was in the saddle laughing down at him.

"Lucky I don't need much putting! But you'll improve with practice."

"If I get the chance and have the pluck to take it,"

he answered, wondering why he was not covered with confusion.

Then they set off together at a brisk trot, just escaping the general exodus, while the crowd broke up like the waters of the deep, and streamed over the wide landscape, powdered with the gold-dust of evening, the sound of their voices and laughter carrying far in the frosty air. The hills that were harsh and aggressive at noon seemed to have retreated miles, so etherealized were they in their sunset splendour, rose-madder and amethyst and dusky purple deepening to black. By day an armoury of drawn swords; they seemed, at this mystical Hour of Union, to radiate a peace not of the earth—a peace not merely of healing, but of promise.

For Vincent those hills were always a sensible presence; and to-night his spirit was keenly responsive to their sunset mood. It was good to escape from the station crowd, good to canter through the keen air with this lovely and bewildering girl, who was still for him 'one half woman and one half dream.' Now and again he glanced at her as they rode; and once, as he was watching her, she turned her head. Their eyes met in one of those swift reciprocal glances that quicken intimacy, and she smiled.

"It's perfect, isn't it?" she said simply. "I love this time of day; especially out here. Just now I was wishing—a bit of mad foolishness—that we could ride on and on to where the rainbow ends, right through those dream hills, that look as if they were made out of sunset colours, and ought to be full of gnomes or fairies instead of wild Afridi fiends, who rob and murder each other just 'to pass the time'!"

"Talking of Afridi fiends," said Vincent, reining in his pony to a walk, "a queer thing happened in our lines this morning."

"A murder story? Do tell me!"

He pursed his lips and regarded her with a whimsical air of distress. "I seem to have let myself in! I'm not very good at telling."

"All the more reason you should practise. Go on!"

And encouraged by her eager interest he went on. Lamely at first, but with more of detail and vigour as he warmed to his subject, he told her the tale of Fuzl Ali Khan and of the martyred Mullah who had involuntarily supplied the Tirah Afridis with their first shrine. He had his reward for the initial effort in her low laughter, and the quick play of her features that charmed him into forgetfulness of himself.

She had her mother's intuitive gift of touching the right spring; and to-day she was more than usually successful. To-day this odd, inaccessible subaltern—who would evidently like to "be friends" if he could only manage it—spoke more fluently than she had heard him speak yet. It had been a case of digging for hidden gold; but at all events the gold was there. It gleamed unmistakably when their talk passed on from the way of the Afridi to the world of books. He waxed almost eloquent over a recent acquisition—the folk-songs of Roumania, lately translated by Carmen Sylva. Since the book arrived, he confessed that work had gone to the dogs. The poems had cast a spell upon him with their weird primitive mingling of terror and beauty. He even quoted a fragment or two in his deep, well-modulated voice, looking straight before him.

Thea, delighted at this fresh revelation, begged a sight of the book, and his face lit up with pleasure. He would lend it to her. She should have it to-morrow.

"I never imagined you liked poetry as much as all that," she said, regarding the outline of his profile with quickened interest. "In fact—I'm rather puzzled about you."

"Puzzled—how?" he asked, a hint of alarm in his tone.

"Well, I can't make out if you really *are* a soldier inside or if you only wear the uniform and do the work?"

"That's rather a searching question," he said, reddening a little. "I'm sometimes puzzled myself. I'm

afraid—to be honest, it's still mainly a case of wearing the uniform and doing the work."

"But then, why are you doing it? Did you sort of tumble into the Army by accident?"

Her lightness dispelled his alarm. "No, I tumbled in very much on purpose! Colonel Wyndham had a good deal to say to it."

"Well played, Uncle Paul! There's no profession like it. You wait. See if I'm not right. Soldiers are lovely things. At least—they are to me. You see, we're all soldiers, we Desmonds and Merediths. The boys nearly all *be* them and the girls marry them. I'd give anything to be one myself; but I suppose I'll have to be content with the next best fate—one of these days. It'll have to be the nearest thing to Father that India can produce.—Oh dear! Here we are home. It's been a lovely ride."

She spoke as frankly as a child: and Vincent following her through the blue gate-posts, resolved to be, for once, as other men. On alighting, he would go boldly forward and give her a lift from the saddle. But by now the rest of the party had caught up with them. Howard and Jerry were close at his heels; and for a fatal moment, he hesitated. Under their eyes he would muddle things to a certainty, and they would chaff him without mercy.

And while he hesitated, Howard strode past him, took the girl's hands, and swung her to the ground.

Vincent swore inwardly—and remained in the saddle.

"Mr Leigh, aren't you coming in?" Thea Desmond's voice sounded from the verandah steps, and his resolution wavered—but not fatally.

"I can't, thanks. I'm afraid I must get back."

"Is it really 'must'?" she asked, a gleam of mischief in her eyes: and before he could think of an answer Howard struck in.

"Devil a bit, Miss Desmond. He's merely qualifying to turn fakir, and that's his pleasant little way of intimating that he's had enough of frivolous folk like

ourselves! Some day Roddy and I must raid his quarters and confiscate all those mysterious documents that are his standing excuse for being unsociable!"

Vincent felt his temper rising; but he merely lifted his cap.

"You can believe that or not as you like, Miss Desmond," he said quietly. "I must go, all the same."

"I don't believe a word of it!" she called after him as he rode away.

Alone in his room—where books had a way of accumulating in a manner quite prohibitive for a Piffer sub—he made no pretence at work. There was nothing that urgently needed doing; and if there had been, he would not have done it. The glow of that wonderful ride had been chilled by something more than mere vexation and disappointment over a trifle. Howard's chaff had struck a little too near the mark.

With a sigh he flung himself into his Madeira lounge and picked up *The Bard of the Dimbowitza*. He opened it at "The Luteplayer's House," and entered, in spirit, that magical cottage, free of the sun's caresses, the wind's buffetings, and the scent of the forest; musical with the visitation of birds and "the songs that there abide."

But the quaint, disconnected refrain, pitched in a minor key, struck a chord too nearly in tune with his disheartened mood.

> "I took the beads of her necklace, all,
> To thread them for her, but they did fall
> From my trembling hands, and a hundred ways
> They rolled through the green young maize . . ."

The lines, with their haunting suggestion of failure, at once fascinated and maddened him. He marked them, put aside the book, and drew out his mother's letter, received that morning, and hurriedly skimmed to make sure that all was well. Now he read it leisurely, savouring its atmosphere of ordered peace and the salt breath of the Atlantic that it brought to

his nostrils. But a paragraph towards the end jerked him back to his own everlasting problem whereto all roads seemed to converge, just as every path brought Alice in the Looking-Glass up against the House.

"By the time you get this," wrote Margaret Wyndham, "you will be settled in Kohat, and I sincerely trust, dear boy, that you are growing more reconciled to the life and getting closer in touch with those around you. Remember it will need a conscious effort, even in the kindliest conditions; and the longer you delay that effort the less you will be inclined to make it; and the less will you be likely to succeed——"

At that point he laid down the letter and asked himself squarely had he yet made any sustained effort worthy of the name? Did he mean to let things slide and disappoint her after all?

Vincent, whatever his failings, was honest with himself, and therein lay his hope of ultimate salvation. Truth compelled admission that he had shirked the effort, and inclined his ear rather to the voice of selfishness that argued: "If you follow your natural bent, who will be the worse for it? No one. If you wrestle ineffectually with uncongenial activities, who will be the better for it? No one. Moral—Go your own way in peace." The admission pricked his conscience. Sir Theo Desmond's remark about the fear of living had left an uncomfortably strong impression on his mind; but he was beginning to suspect that, in his own case, the fear that crippled him was fear of failure, *plus* the minor dread of making a fool of himself in the eyes of his fellows.

This afternoon's trivial hesitation was typical of a hundred others that all pointed one way. Unsure of himself, he would risk no hurt to his sensitiveness and pride, with the result that Howard had forestalled him, and he had lost a golden chance of hearing Thea Desmond play or sing.

Since that first night of adventure he had heard her about half a dozen times, and each hearing had whetted

his appetite for more. Music, for him, was at once the food of the spirit, and the most direct expression of those verities and aspirations that can no more be contained in speech or thought than the fragrance of summer can be imprisoned in a net. She was probably playing now, and the conviction roused him from passive dejection to an active resolve that this hampering disability of his should no longer be allowed to command the situation. Though every instinct might counsel retreat, he would make the dreaded effort to mix more freely with his fellows. He would accept the part of Peter; and would even submit to the martyrdom of dancing lessons, if Mrs Eden and Miss Desmond would take him in hand. Wrestling simultaneously with the valse step and Miss Williams was more than he felt called upon to endure even for the salvation of his doubtfully important soul.

At all events he would bestir himself, in defiance of the chaff and comment from which he shrank—and chance the result.

That night he slipped out early after Mess and spent half an hour or so pacing the Mall before Eden's bungalow, while snatches of Scottish ballads and Schubert's "Rosamunde" music spoke comfort and encouragement to his heart. But though he felt almost certain that the two women were alone, he did not go in.

PHASE III.

THE IMPERFECT LOVER

CHAPTER I.

"Thou art a star behind the hills and I am a passer-by upon the road."
—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

"By Jove, aren't Miss Desmond and old Lynn just ripping in that duet? They've both got a touch of the real thing in them. No mistake about that."

Thus Roddy Maclean, sitting beside Vincent some ten days after the polo match, while the fourth rehearsal of Howard's production went forward, with great spirit, on the small stage of the new Kohat Club. On the whole, he was not dissatisfied with his caste; but for once his critical spirit was in abeyance. So long as Thea Desmond played Pipette, the rest might go as they pleased, within reason. The Finlays, Leigh, and Miss Williams accounted for the remaining characters, a Witch, a Miser, Peter, and Martha, landlady of the Inn. Five supers, including Mayne and Myles, supplied a skeleton chorus of villagers; Phyllis accompanied them; and so far, all things considered, the venture promised well. Kohat audiences were not exacting; and Gilbert's old fantasy had the merit of including songs and dances, skilfully replenished by Howard, to whom no form of activity seemed to come amiss. The rather obvious farce hinged upon the Wicked Old Lady, who took offence at each in turn and retaliated by casting spells of the true Gilbertian order. The Sergeant, famous for both kinds of gallantry, was condemned to duck violently away from all who approached him. Pipette, shyest of the shy, must go about offering

every one her lips, and the Miser his guineas; while Peter, a coward confessed, must square up and shout "Come on!" to the world at large for presuming to bully a defenceless old woman. Here was argument enough for a piece of fooling that could be astonishingly redeemed by spirited acting; and, like others of its kind, it served at least to quicken intimacies and evoke hidden talent. Above all, it gave Lynn Howard the best possible excuse for spending most of his leisure in Thea Desmond's society.

Vincent's halting offer to try his hand at the part of Peter had been received with a friendly "Right you are. Very sporting of you, old chap. If you're really no go, I can but give you the hint." And there followed rehearsals, sufficiently amusing to watch, but a purgatorial business when Vincent was called on to mount the platform, to put life into foolish phrases, and suffer the beginner's horrid sense of being suddenly endowed with an over large and conspicuous pair of hands. But if there were moments of acute misery, there were compensations also. For him, as for Howard, rehearsals chiefly meant seeing a good deal more of General Desmond's daughter. They enabled him to watch her dance and hear her sing; and his joy in these things had of late become too poignant for comfort. But not yet did this significant change enlighten him; for as yet no thought of personal possession marred the dream of his high worship. His attitude was still that of the poet rather than the lover. He could still love beauty without the natural man's desire to monopolise it. The pangs that visited him he set down to unworthy envy of Howard's talents and privileges, to which no common mortal could aspire. His own immediate privilege was the promise of dancing lessons that would probably lead nowhere. But for the moment it sufficed that they led him occasionally, after rehearsal, to the blue bungalow, where he would squander half an hour or so in the fearful joy of trying to manipulate his feet that proved almost as intractable as his hands.

Then Thea would sing to him, or talk Roumanian folk-songs, and his futile ambition would melt into air.

She was singing now, and the tremor of nervousness in her voice made it sound only the lovelier in Vincent's ears. The flutter of applause that greeted it sent the blood to her cheeks, and it was then that Roddy voiced his approval. But Vincent's attention was riveted on Thea, who had retired with Howard to the back of the stage, where they remained talking very earnestly in undertones.

Howard was plainly absorbed in the girl, who listened to him with lowered eyes; and Vincent felt a sudden intolerable longing to know what was passing between them. Why did she never listen to him with that dreamy look on her face? As if by way of answer, there raced through him a physical pang, like a stiletto prick in the region of his heart. And at that very moment, Roddy—who was also watching them—spoke again.

"Blest if I don't think old Lynn means to pull *that* off before Christmas," he remarked with genial emphasis; and Vincent felt as if every one must have seen him start.

"Pull off—what do you mean?" he asked blankly, and Roddy chuckled.

"Well, I declare you're the limit! An infant in arms could see what's up. Never saw Lynn so dead gone on a girl before. There've been episodes, of course. But this is IT, or I'll eat my ammunition boots! Good luck for the regiment, anyway."

Again that queer new pang stabbed Vincent—stabbed him, this time, broad awake. And so dislocating was the process that he had to set his teeth before he could speak.

"Are you so certain—of her?" he asked, with his eyes on the girl.

"My dear chap, I wouldn't presume to be certain of anything in petticoats. But it stands to reason a girl with two eyes in her head isn't likely to refuse

Howard. And Miss Desmond seems willing enough from the look of her."

Yes, she seemed willing enough, Vincent admitted, as he watched the byplay at the back of the stage with painfully enlightened eyes. Again he wondered, with a fierce and quite unwarrantable resentment, what Howard could be saying to make the colour deepen in her cheeks. How near was he to that ultimate question which had never so much as entered his own most foolish head? All this time Howard had doubtless been wooing her, as men were surely meant to woo such as she; while he, Vincent, had not dared to approach her too nearly in thought or act. It was even conceivable that he might never have ventured nearer had she not suddenly been presented to him as the possible wife of another. Probable seemed nearer the mark. Men like Howard had but to ask—and take. At the thought jealousy flamed in him; jealousy such as he had never yet known, because till now he had not known the sting of personal desire.

And all the while he sat there outwardly unmoved, answering Roddy's spasmodic remarks, and watching those senseless antics on the stage, rendered still more senseless by contrast with the pain and passion in his heart. Those two—the only two in creation at that moment—had come forward again to take part in a general scene; and very soon it was his own turn to join them. Sharply pulling himself together, he spoke his part like a man in a dream: managed to steer clear of Miss Desmond, and left the building directly he was free to do so without explanation or excuse.

It was at once a relief and a renewal of torment to be alone with his discovery. Springing into the saddle he set out at a hand-gallop for the race-course, as if hoping, by sheer speed, to escape the tumult within. But relief was momentary. The pain increased rather as he mentally picked up the shattered fragments of his unawakened life. Slackening speed, he rode back

and away along the road to the hills, confronting and combating this new imperious emotion that blinded him with its brightness and transposed all values in the twinkling of an eye.

Here was the net result, he reflected bitterly, of trying to get into closer touch with his fellows. He had but scorched his heart at the flame of life, and would never know peace again. Neither could he ever know fulfilment. It was unthinkable that Howard should fail. Though hardly a second Desmond, honesty compelled the recognition of striking qualities in him that must infallibly appeal to this soldier-loving girl.

Vincent came very near to hating the man he could not choose but admire in spite of everything; and this also was a new sensation. For him, the professed Stoic, fierce antagonisms were as inadmissible as fierce desires; but within this last half-hour, unmarked by any visible event, he had suffered a volcanic upheaval of his whole being. Things primitive and elemental suddenly asserted themselves with bewildering emphasis; and even in the midst of his stunned misery he was aware that never, in all his three-and-twenty years, had he been so magnificently, so excruciatingly alive.

As these new sensations had, presumably, "come to stay," life must be reorganised accordingly. No more dancing lessons after this: and the fact that, in three days' time, Eden's wing of the Regiment would be detailed for the annual musketry course now seemed a God-sent excuse for throwing up his part. And the day after to-morrow there was the Bachelors' Dance, to which he had been almost looking forward, and which would now be little better than the usual ordeal. Yet go he must, if only because he was promised two "sitting-out dances" with his "Lady of the Violin," whom he now knew for the dear and unattainable mistress of his heart.

Riding back, he caught sight of them all strolling home from the Club—Howard and Miss Desmond lead-

ing, Mrs Eden following with Roddy and Blake—and with a deft movement he turned his pony's head in the opposite direction. It would be all he could do to face his brother officers at Mess. It seemed to him, just then, that his secret must be written on his forehead for all the world to read.

CHAPTER II.

"If our virtues do not go forth of us
'Tis all alike as if we had them not."
—SHAKESPEARE.

APPARENTLY it was not so. To most of his brother officers the loquacity of Balaam's Ass had seemed no greater miracle than the falling in love of Vincent Leigh. Kind-hearted Jerry had, indeed, suffered an occasional tweak of anxiety since it had dawned on him that his services were obviously not required. But he was developing a dim respect for the reticences of his incomprehensible friend, and he could only hope that his concern for Vincent was as groundless now as in the first instance.

Vincent himself had already begun to discover the astonishing adaptability of the human organism to the most dislocating conditions, given a fair measure of grit and the habit of self-control. But these new, commanding emotions abated not one whit; and on the evening of the dance, he found courage to tackle Howard and confess that he wanted to throw up his part. Musketry and the Munshi, he added, would take up most of his time, and there must be half a dozen other fellows who would make a better job of Peter than he could ever do.

Howard received these announcements with an amused twinkle in his eyes: "Blest if you aren't the pink of modesty, old chap! And it's genuine. That's the joke. You'd pull the thing off all the same if you chose to stick it out. Didn't think you would, though;

and Jerry will do. What's it you're imbibing from the Munshi with such particular *zeal*?"

Vincent reddened at the raillery in his tone. "Well, there's the Pushtu, of course; and I'm keen to start Persian. It opens up such a big field."

"Lord, you're insatiable! But it seems to keep you happy; and the Colonel doesn't half disapprove of you!" At sight of Vincent's blank face he burst out laughing. "All serene, Vinx. As a matter of fact, if you want the embarrassing truth, he thinks you're no end promising along your own line. Musketry and judging distance will do you good for a change; though I bet you'll have a Persian grammar up your sleeve in the butts! Don't let Eden catch you at it, that's all. It won't be lively on the range with *him* just now. He and Blake have done some heavy losing at Pindi and Peshawur races; and judging from his *chits* at Mess, his 'little drinks' last month would float a young transport. And there's Mrs Eden—such a rare good sort. It's a damn bad business. There's a limit to what a man can do in that line and remain in the Army."

Vincent frowned. "Anything—like that would smash her up altogether."

"And nothing short of it, so far as I can see, is going to make her flinch. Is it blind devotion—or loyalty?"

"Loyalty," Vincent declared with none of his usual hesitation. "If she ever seems blind it's because she chooses to be."

"I believe you're right. You seem a bit handier with your eyes than with your tongue, old chap."

"Well, I—it's my small compensation for being mostly in the background."

"What's the blooming fascination about the background, Leigh? You positively shove yourself there! Hope it's not going to be a chronic disease."

"Quite likely."

"Rot! You've plenty of capacity carefully stowed away. But you can't expect folk to come and dig for

it. You're a bit of a fool, you know, to throw up your part in this piece."

It was a back-handed compliment, and Vincent was grateful for it; but he held his ground. "Well, mind you turn up this evening. As you won't dance, I think I'll make you a steward——"

"No, no—for goodness sake!" Vincent protested in genuine alarm. "I'll turn up all right."

And he kept his word.

The third dance was promised to Miss Desmond, and he slipped unnoticed into the ball-room just in time to see her re-enter it on Howard's arm. Never had she appeared to him more entirely lovely and adorable, and that without a shadow of consciousness to mar the effect. An incarnate sunbeam he had named her in his thoughts; but to-night she suggested a moonbeam in her filmy-looking gown of palest primrose, with forget-me-nots at her breast and a cluster of them tucked into the coils of her bright hair.

She was laughing up at her partner as they entered: and again Vincent felt that new pang dart through him. For one cowardly moment he meditated flight. Howard would get his dances; and no doubt she would be the better pleased. But like many of his kind, Vincent was no coward in the grain, and a few seconds later he was on the other side of the room offering Miss Desmond his arm. The light pressure of her finger-tips quickened his pulses; and in the silence that followed his rather awkward greeting, he led her back to the empty verandah where Chinese lanterns made a mellow twilight.

For the next twelve minutes they would have the place almost to themselves. What could not a Howard achieve in twelve minutes? And he, Vincent, would make nothing of them—nothing.

He had hardly spoken six words to her since his startling discovery; yet, by some strange paradox, she seemed nearer to him, in every sense, than before. Never had he felt so acutely aware of any living being as of this girl who walked beside him, herself serenely

unaware of the volcanic forces she had waked to life. By now she had come to accept his odd silences as part of his general and rather attractive oddness; and as he led her to the farther end of the verandah, it was she who spoke first.

"Mr Howard's been telling me you want to throw up your part, just because of musketries and Munshis. It's rather annoying of you, really, when everything's going so well."

"I—I'm sorry," he murmured in genuine distress. —"Tackling Howard" was nothing to this.—"I'm afraid I must, all the same; and Jerry will do it twice as well."

"Nonsense! That's false modesty. And I'm getting not quite to believe in your 'musts!' Will it be 'must' to-morrow when you're supposed to come for another dancing lesson?"

At this rate his twelve minutes would be purgatory unalloyed. They had reached a couple of chairs, and he was thankful even for the respite of a moment.

"Will it?" she asked sweetly as they sat down.

"Well, I—honestly, Miss Desmond, it's not much good learning the steps, when I know I could never steer a woman through a crowd, even if I had the face to ask any of them for dances. You and Mrs Eden have been so very kind to me——"

"Without much result! Don't you think it looks rather wobbly giving up so soon? And you're not wobbly—about other things. Is it the Munshi and the musketry again?"

"Yes, partly. And I'm afraid it's partly—just Vincent Leigh."

She laughed on a low soft note. "*That's* the truth at last! And we'd just begun to have hopes of you. You know—you're rather a disappointing person, Mr Leigh."

"Yes, I *do* know, worse luck. Really I'm not worth troubling about. Then no one suffers but myself."

He spoke with such sorrowful conviction that in a swift impulse of sympathy she laid a hand on the arm of his chair, within half an inch of his elbow.

"Oh, but I didn't mean it seriously. It was horrid of me, even in fun. And you shan't be worried about the dancing if you feel it's hopeless. But come to-morrow, and we'll have music instead. You like that —don't you?"

"I like it better than anything on earth."

"I guessed as much," she said with her small wise nod. "So do I. We'll just have an orgie—shall we? And if you do change your mind about the theatricals you can easily tell Mr Howard I over-persuaded you."

Vincent did not answer at once. His eyes were riveted on the hand that still rested close to his arm. He was wondering crazily what would happen, how would she look, if he took sudden possession of it and stammered out the astounding truth. Suddenly he realised that she was watching him with amused speculation in her eyes.

"Are you thinking it over now?" she asked as he looked up.

"N-no. I wasn't—exactly. And I wouldn't quite like telling Howard that. I fancy you would do it better than I should."

"Miles better! Shall I? May I?"

She was the child again now—eager, irresistible. But he was not to be taken by storm. "I've still got to do the thinking over!" he reminded her, smiling.

"All right. Let me know when you're ready, and I'll settle it with Mr Howard. Isn't he splendid fun as the Sergeant?"

"Yes. He seems to have been born with half a dozen silver spoons in his mouth!"

She nodded, looking pensively out into the darkness. "I sometimes wonder if there's anything he can't do," she mused: but that was not a subject

on which Vincent felt disposed to enlarge; and there fell a short silence.

Was she thinking of Howard, he wondered; and would have given a year of his life for an answer in the negative. When at last she turned to him again, it seemed that her thoughts had travelled miles from the subject.

"Mr Leigh, I was specially wanting to speak about something . . . rather not my business," she began with a shy hesitancy very rare in her. "But we've wasted half the time, and this place will soon be full of people. Couldn't we walk outside till the dance begins?"

"Of course we could." He rose with alacrity. "Won't you be rather cold though?"

"I'll get my cloak." She darted into the ladies' room, and reappeared in a long blue garment that seemed to add an inch to her height. "That's better," she said, turning up the fur collar so that it framed her face. And together they went out into a darkness luminous with stars.

"What is it?" he asked a little anxiously; and she answered, still with a touch of hesitation: "It's Phyllis and—Captain Eden. I wouldn't speak of it to any one else. But you seem almost like a sort of relation, because of Uncle Paul. So you'll understand —won't you? It's just between ourselves."

The words were music to his ears. "Of course I'll understand. I've felt rather worried myself lately."

She turned to him eagerly. "*Have* you? That makes it much easier to speak. He *is* queer now and then, isn't he? His eyes, his voice, and oh—his temper! It half frightens me sometimes; and sometimes—when he swears at Phyllis—I feel I could hardly trust myself with a riding-whip——!" She was terribly in earnest; but her abiding sense of humour tripped her up, and she laughed. "That's nonsense, of course. Just my wicked temper. But still—I mean every *word* I say. You know I adore Phyllis, and she isn't strong; and I'm so dreadfully afraid . . .

Mr Leigh, what *is* it? You don't think he's going off his head?"

"No, no. Nothing of that sort," Vincent hastened to assure her. "I thought you understood."

"How should I understand? I don't have these kind of horrors in *my* home."

"No, indeed. And I'm not surprised your father didn't altogether like leaving you here. The trouble with poor Eden—is drink."

"Ugh!" she wrinkled her nose and fastidious upper lip. For her that ugly word changed the aspect of things from tragedy to mere degradation. "But why? What's the *matter* with him?"

"I should say temperament is the matter with him, and losing money. You see he plays a good deal, and races with Blake. And when things go wrong he consoles himself, according to his taste, as best he can."

"As worst he can, *I* should say." The soft voice sounded almost stern in its young arraignment of temptations unknown. "He mostly seems to console himself with making Phil cry and swearing at darling, plucky Phyllis. How on earth she stands it! Fancy such a man for your husband! And you're *supposed* to love your husband."

"I believe so. At least—theoretically," Vincent ventured with due caution. "I'm not well up in the subject myself."

She laughed. "Nor am I. But I'm quite sure Phyllis's love must be very theoretical indeed by this time.—Hullo! There's music. We must go back. I am thankful it isn't—what I thought; though it's quite bad enough; and it sets all my prickles on end. But I'm not really a murderous fiend—am I?"

They were entering the mellow twilight of the verandah, and his gaze lingered on her childlike face with its delicately determined profile. "I shouldn't call that a particularly accurate description of you!" he said; and at the sound of their voices a bulky form that loomed in the doorway strode towards them.

Howard, of course, and Vincent felt as a candle might feel when daylight puts it to shame.

"Miss Desmond, at last! I thought you had evaporated!" There was impatience in his tone. "What—Leigh! You're the sinner, are you? Anchorites who don't dance have no business to steal other fellows' partners."

"It wasn't *his* fault," Thea struck in with her young imperiousness. "It was my suggestion to walk outside for a little. We had something . . . rather special to discuss."

"Great luck for Vinx! Well, *I've* got something uncommonly special to discuss with you for the next two dances, Miss Desmond. And we've wasted enough of 'em. Come on," and without further preamble he unfastened her cloak and handed it to Vincent. "There you are, Leigh. You can freeze on to that! And it's more than you deserve after knocking a hole in my dance."

But Thea was in a rebellious mood. "Don't attend to his nonsense, Mr Leigh. Throw it down anywhere. I'll find it," she said as she whirled off lightly as a blown feather on Howard's arm.

For several seconds Vincent stood watching, in a state of very unstoical commotion, the ease and swiftness of their going and the look of dreamy contentment on Thea's face. There were moments when her hair seemed almost to brush her partner's scarlet sleeve: moments of painful enlightenment to one still so lamentably unversed in the mysteries of the human heart. Howard's implied air of possession filled him with unreasonable anger at the casual ease with which other men could gain access to her whom he dared not approach casually even in thought. Only let a few bars of dance music strike up, and any one of them was privileged to hold her as Howard held her now; while he himself had just deliberately flung away his chance of ever attaining that privilege. But there remained the consolation that she had sought him out for her confidence, and he had his reward now for

that touch of the ascetic in his composition. He could still accept what she chose to offer, though the supreme gift could never be his.

While he stood there Phyllis circled past him, hampered rather than guided by the unpractised gyrations of Blake, who prided himself on being 'no lady's man,' and rarely patronized dances unless there was a prospect of supper and champagne. Vincent noted with a pang the waxen pallor of Mrs Eden's face, the smudges under her eyes, and the strained line of her lower lip. But she greeted him, in passing, with the friendliest smile and an amused glance at the blue velvet cloak on his arm. That roused him to the awful realization that he, who had never carried a lady's wrap, was, so to speak, flaunting this one in the doorway for all Kohat to see. But Kohat was far too busy enjoying itself to trouble its head about the strange juxtaposition of 'Cerberus' and a blue velvet cloak; and Vincent, retreating hurriedly, went out again into the night, still carrying the shell of her, which, according to Howard, was more than he deserved. Its softness and faint fragrance made him feel as though some disembodied essence of her still walked beside him there under the stars; but their talk had been so full of tragic reality that no mere lover's fantasy could hold him for long.

Was this what Sir Theo had in his mind when he spoke of 'things' being difficult? Or did he and Lady Desmond only imperfectly know the facts of the case? Of course the more serious development might be a passing phase, due to losses, as Howard had implied. Certainly at Bannu he would not have called Eden a drinker except in the mildest sense, implying a predilection for pegs and port wine. But how far was the trouble likely to go now? And—ought he to mention it to Sir Theo? That was the nagging doubt at the back of his mind.

The General had bidden him keep a brotherly eye on his 'little girl,' who might not like to write herself if 'things' were difficult; and by now Vincent felt

morally certain that she would not dream of writing, however difficult 'things' might be; that she would, in fact, hotly resent the idea of her confidence being used to make life harder for Mrs Eden. However, the matter was no secret. Howard seemed to think seriously of it; and conscience whispered that his duty was plain. But what of the result? If the Desmonds knew the truth, they would probably find some plausible pretext to recall their daughter: and Kohat empty of Thea Desmond would be empty indeed! Conscience might clamour; but it seemed that something more imperious than conscience meant to have the last word.

And there were other considerations that encouraged his innate reluctance to act. There was Mrs Eden—overworked, overtaxed, and shadowed by something very like tragedy. There was Miss Desmond's slightly exaggerated yet genuine devotion to her cousin and her probable leaning towards Howard; but upon that consideration Vincent did not care to dwell.

And here was he, of all people, called upon to make a decision that might vitally affect the lives of half a dozen folk, who had appeared to him almost as trees walking not two months ago. Now, his eyes being opened, he saw how he had been unwittingly drawn into this tangle of human destinies by the magnetism of one girl, and by that mystery within, which Roddy's chance remarks had flashed into conscious life. It was all rather bewildering and disturbing, unused as he was to have other people's problems knocking at his door. In that salutary hour of enlightenment he began to feel amazingly ignorant about everything. Worse still, he realised, with shame, that till now he had seldom given half an hour's thought to any problems other than his own.

Absorbed in his doubts and speculations he wandered on and out into the Mall, oblivious of the fact that Miss Desmond might need her cloak for wanderings with other privileged partners, and put him to unspeakable confusion by discovering that he had

frozen on to it as Howard bade him. Two cigarettes brought him no nearer to a decision in respect of his next letter to Sir Theo, but in the middle of the second one he awoke to the fact that Mrs Eden had graciously offered to sit out with him: and having no programme, he had forgotten the number arranged. Hoping to goodness he had not really been long gone, he flung away his cigarette-end and hurried back to the Mess.

As he neared the verandah the band struck up a valse that drew shadowy couples out of their corners as though it were a magnet and they filings of steel. Then, as the world rushed back upon him, he became embarrassingly aware of the tell-tale cloak on his arm.

The minute the verandah was empty he would spring up the steps and——

What was that? Thea Desmond's voice, agitated as he had never heard it, and raised a little in angry remonstrance. The words escaped him. She and her partner were evidently in the tented corner at the end of the verandah. He could hear them moving. The rest of the place was empty; and he remained on the lowest step, the cloak forgotten again, his heart leaping in uneven bounds.

"Can it be Eden?" The thought flashed through his brain; and the next moment two figures emerged into the half light, Thea Desmond walking swiftly ahead. Her partner's silhouette—slight, narrow, and just perceptibly bow-legged—was unmistakable: not Eden, but Bobby Blake.

"Good Lord! the way you talk one 'ud think I'd insulted you." The sneer in his nasal drawl made it more unpleasant than usual. "What's the harm, anyway, you hot-headed little Puritan! Never knew a woman make such an almighty fuss about a trifle."

"Well, you should dance with the kind that don't. And you *have* insulted me. I'm used to dancing with *gentlemen*."

Thea Desmond's voice was low and scornful. But

beneath the scorn Vincent detected a faint tremor; and there flamed in him a mad desire to hit out and smash that sneering travesty of a man, for whom a woman and a horse were in much the same category.

Then Howard appeared in the doorway. "That you, Miss Desmond? Our dance, I think," he said cheerfully; and Thea, in the sharpness of her relief, almost ran into his arms.

For Vincent, that was the last straw. Between rage and jealousy all the elemental man flared up in him. He understood now what it meant to 'see red'; and Blake—turning away sulkily from the ballroom—found himself confronted by this new Vincent, with murder in his heart but no adequate words at command.

His throat felt constricted. He could only stammer with fierce conviction: "You—you despicable cad! How dare you——!"

And Blake retorted, mocking him: "You — you damned officious young prig. Keep your hair on! It's no concern of yours what I choose to say to a fool of a girl——"

He got no farther. Vincent, transported with rage, hit out from the shoulder, and Blake staggered under the blow, but stood his ground. With an unprintable oath he sprang at Vincent, who closed with him, silently, purposefully. The mad desire to smash something was on him again. His hands desired to kill Blake; and for one wild moment the rest of him had no say in the matter.

There followed a short silent scrimmage. While a score of people within circled round the ball-room, these two men swayed under the Chinese lanterns, breathing heavily through set teeth. In the first two minutes Blake felt himself out-matched, for Vincent was a fair wrestler and the bigger man: and just as he had failed in a vicious attempt to trip up his antagonist, there entered the verandah Eden and Maclean; the former in search of Blake.

The sight that confronted them seemed sheerly im-

possible. But if Eden had been drinking, Maclean was sober enough to believe the evidence of his senses.

"Holy Moses, here's a rare old scrap!" was his sole comment; and it was Eden who hurried forward shouting: "Leigh—Blake! what the devil——! Drop it, Leigh. Confound you, drop it, I say!"

But the command came too late, or was deliberately unheeded. Vincent had got in a decisive blow that sent Blake sprawling, and brought his head into violent impact with the concrete floor. He lay there motionless! and Vincent, with the blood still throbbing in his temples, wondered vaguely: "Is he dead?"

But neither the question nor the fear had any reality for him yet. He saw Eden rush forward and kneel down beside Blake, heard his fierce "Damn you, Leigh, what's the meaning of this?" saw Roddy hurry away for brandy; all as though they and he were figures in a dream, weirdly mixed up with the strains of the Mikado valse. For the whole affair had passed in less than five minutes, and the unsuspecting dancers still whirled within.

As his blood cooled down he heard Eden speaking again thickly and angrily. "Stunned. That's all; and you may thank your stars it's no worse."—Vincent proceeded to thank them with silent fervour.—"What the devil did you mean by it?"

"Better ask Blake," Vincent replied bluntly.

"Confound your impertinence!" growled the kneeling man. "You apologise to Blake, or I report you to the Colonel."

Vincent set his teeth. "Blake will get no apology out of me."

"You 'pologise, or I report you," Eden repeated with slightly fuddled persistence. "Here you are, Roddy. Give us a hand with him into the men's cloak-room. Half Kohat 'll be out here in a jiffey. As for *you*"—he scowled over his shoulder at Vincent—"I settle up with you to-morrow. Damn lot *you* care about the credit of the Regiment."

Vincent answered nothing, He did not even see Roddy's jovial wink of encouragement; and as the two hurried off with his half-recovered victim, that interminable Mikado valse crashed to its close.

Roused at last, he jumped swiftly and lightly down from the verandah and hurried away, hoping against hope that Roddy and Eden would keep the affair to themselves. He knew enough of his kind by now to feel sure it would not go beyond the Regiment and the 'Creatures'; but it was precisely the dread of these that had driven him out into the compound, where he paced under the stars, trying to recapture the balance of things—so rudely upset, in the last few days, that his familiar ordered world seemed to be crashing about his ears.

CHAPTER III.

"Others for the breath of words respect,
Me for my dumb thoughts, speaking in effect."
—SHAKESPEARE.

His first instinct had been to walk straight on home. Even if no one else knew, Roddy would lose no time in imparting so excellent a joke to Howard and Jerry; and he did not choose either to pose as a prig or as the champion of a girl whose affections were presumably engaged elsewhere. Not consideration for Blake, but his own pride and a deep determination to keep Miss Desmond's name out of the affair, made explanation or apology unthinkable; and Eden's threat, that had struck the vein of obstinacy in Vincent, served only to strengthen his right-minded resolve.

But as to flinging away his second dance with her, already solitude and the night air were having their say in that matter. Moreover, that mad, exultant moment of action—he shamefully admitted the exultation—was not without its effect. In the light of it, he saw his impulse to retreat as mere cowardice, and decided to go back—presently. But no breathing space was allowed him. Already afar off he recognised the dapper silhouette and springy walk of Jerry; and he surrendered to the inevitable with a sigh.

"Hullo, Vinx! Thought I'd nobble you!" was his lively greeting. "Were you making a bolt for it, eh?"

"I . . . well, I meant to, but I thought better of it."

"Good for you, old chap. Roddy let on to our set, in strictest confidence, of course. But, Lord, who'd

athought you had it in you? Not Blake, I bet. He isn't enjoying himself in the card-room, not much. The charitable believe Eden's tale that he missed his footing on the verandah steps. The uncharitable wink the other eye! Howard and Roddy are dying to offer congrats. But there'll be some chaff, I warn you."

"Oh, hang it all!"

"Quite so! But if you *will* let off a blooming bomb-shell under our noses what can you expect? What the deuce was the little skunk up to?" (Blake was a good two inches taller than Jerry.)

"He was behaving like a skunk. That's all I've got to say. For heaven's sake don't pester me with questions."

Jerry jerked up his eyebrows; and as they entered the verandah he surreptitiously scrutinised his friend. "'Blest if it's not given quite a tone to your system, having a good old flare up."

Vincent smiled. "The place looks half empty," he said irrelevantly.

"Yes. Supper's on. Howard's got a 'Creatures of Impulse' table. He wanted you to make it complete."

"*Me?* If you'd only said that sooner, I wouldn't have come!"

Jerry winked complacently. "Just so! I'm a blooming diplomat, I am!"

"Well, I'm not there yet." Vincent stood still in the empty verandah.

"Rot! Don't play the fool, Vinx. *Come* on. The turkey and ham's getting cold!"

Vincent laughed in spite of real vexation. "You *are* a champion idiot!" he muttered; and Jerry knew that his idiotcy had prevailed.

Their appearance evoked a round of applause from the Kohat Dramatic Society. Roddy blew a cat-call through his fingers and squared up, shouting—"Hello! Peter the Hermit, come on!"

Howard followed suit with his stage tag—"Don't, I say don't!" And Finlay, standing by Thea, pushed

her gently forward. "Your cue, I think, Pipette! Hasn't the dear Old Lady taught you how to welcome all brave gentlemen?"

Thea, blushing furiously, could only beam on Vincent, who took refuge in silence and smiles. Instinctively he gravitated towards Mrs Eden; and when the party sorted themselves, he secured a chair next to her, only to discover with dismay that Lisa Williams was installing herself in the one next his own. He prayed that her curiosity, which was phenomenal, might not goad him into a repetition of his lapse in the polo tent, now graciously forgiven. But the more general ordeal was not over yet by any means.

Directly the scraping of chairs had ceased, questions rained.

It was, "Look here, old chap, we've yet to learn why you suddenly went Berserk, and we want to know, don't you know?" from Howard; and from Finlay: "Don't say it was force of habit, Leigh, or I shall be afraid my wife has bewitched us in earnest, which would be a bad look-out for my rupees and Miss Desmond's good behaviour!" And while Howard spoke in an undertone to Thea, Roddy struck in: "Blake swears you went for him, which isn't what you might call convincing. Was it a case of 'I'm compelled to hit you. I'm acting under an irresistible impulse?'" he added, quoting Peter's explanation to the Sergeant.

"There or thereabouts," Vincent answered, while Miss Williams was assuring him, in the voice of a conspirator, that she never *could* abide Mr Blake, and she was dying to know—quite privately, of course,—what it was he had been doing *this* time.

Vincent, helpless as a mouse in the clutch of a cat, could only attempt futile wrigglings of evasion, till Phyllis providentially perceived his dilemma.

"Mr Leigh," she said, interrupting a really hopeful manœuvre, "I'm afraid I'm going to be very rude and go home before your dance. In fact, directly

after supper." And so obvious was Vincent's relief that her eyes twinkled as they met his.

"I'm sorry," he said sincerely. "But I'm sure you've had enough of this. You *do* look tired."

Her small attempt at a laugh struck him as one of the saddest sounds he had ever heard.

"A chronic infliction! Not worth troubling about. But Phil's been rather bad with fever, and I don't like to be too long away. Mrs Finlay will see that Thea does nothing disgraceful in my absence! Isn't she looking lovely to-night?"

"Yes, I like that moon-coloured gown." He paused, and it was not of Thea he was thinking but of how Mrs Eden might regard his own conduct. It struck him that he had seen her and Blake a good deal together of late. And she was Eden's wife: a fact one did not altogether care to realise. He wanted to speak of things, so far as he could, before Eden got in his oar, and the general babel made possible a private word or two.

"Mrs Eden," he said, and his voice dropped a tone. "I—I'm afraid your husband is very angry with me."

A faint colour showed on her cheek. "Yes. He would be," she said, impaling a morsel of ham.

"The trouble is, I—I can't apologise, and I can't explain. I admit I lost my temper; not without provocation. That's all I can say; but I do want to feel I stand square with you."

"I can't imagine your ever doing anything else," she answered in the same low tone. Then suddenly she looked up and smiled. "I think I'm rather glad you *have* got a temper to lose! And if you've a good reason for your reticence don't be bullied out of it."

"I don't mean to be."

They were swept again into the maelstrom of talk and laughter; but for Vincent, those few murmured phrases had lightened the whole aspect of things. But there still remained the question, what should he say to Miss Desmond when he could claim her again for those twelve minutes he had so nearly flung

away? To her, of all people he would fain tell the truth; yet to her, of all people, the telling of it seemed impossible. But Thea herself had still to be reckoned with; and she owned a healthy share of feminine curiosity; though it was not, like Lisa Williams's, of the wood-boring beetle order.

The second dance after supper was theirs. He claimed her from Jerry and led her without a word to their former seats at the far end of the verandah.

"That's very nice," she murmured as they sat down; then, turning her head, with the swift, bird-like movement he loved, she smiled on him in frank approval. "Bravo, Mr Leigh! Very much bravo! I'm glad I'm not the only murderous fiend in Kohat!"

Vincent, at once elated and taken aback, muttered awkwardly: "I'm afraid I'd no business to hit out. But I can't honestly say I regret it; though Eden threatens to report me, unless I apologise——"

"Oh, but you mustn't apologise. It would spoil everything. Promise you won't!"

"I think I can safely promise that. The boot's on the other leg."

"I thought so. But, you know, we're still all in the dark about the 'why' of it. You were rather clever, at supper, the way you let all those questions and chaffings flow over you, and at the end, no one was any the wiser. Aren't we ever going to be? Any of us?"

Hard to resist that delicate appeal: harder still to say, in effect: "I did it for love of you." And Vincent reluctantly shook his head.

"I think that part of it's . . . my own affair. But I hope most of our fellows—and you too, Miss Desmond—know me well enough to believe I wouldn't do any such thing without a very good reason."

"Of course we do. But one can't help wondering. I was wondering hugely, all supper-time; and I confess I was rejoicing hugely too. It seemed so odd it should have happened to-night—and just when it did."

"Why odd?—Am I allowed to ask?"

She seemed to ponder that question, while opening and shutting her fan. "Yes, I think you are allowed,—even though I'm not!" She flashed a smile at him and went on, in her quietest voice: "I've always vaguely disliked Mr Blake. I wish he didn't hang round Phyllis so much. Have you noticed?"

Yes, Vincent had noticed it that very evening; his eyes being opened to many things that he had seen, without noticing, in the days before his enlightenment. "Blake's a close friend of her husband's," he said; "I suppose she must be polite to him."

"Well, I'm afraid *I* shan't manage to be, after to-night. He took me into that *kanat* place over there, and—well, he probably thought he was making himself agreeable; but I didn't. I suppose some girls do let their partners——" The workings of the fan became intricate; and Vincent could just see how the colour crept into her cheeks and dyed the clear skin of her throat. "Perhaps nobody's taught them better, poor things! Anyway—I didn't care for Mr Blake's kind of agreeableness; and he seemed very much annoyed. He got quite angry and rude: and it was rather strange you should come along and knock him down, just when I would have simply loved to do it myself."

"Yes. It was rather strange," Vincent mused, and his heart urged that she had the right to know. The depressing fact that she considered him a 'sort of relation' had, at the moment, its convenient side; and just as she began to wonder why her tale had evoked no comment, he leaned forward a little, gripped the arms of his chair, and spoke.

"Miss Desmond, it . , . it wasn't exactly a coincidence. I was there—on the verandah steps."

She turned to him with a small gasp. "Was it . . . because of that?"

"Yes. Because of that."

Her delight and gratitude overwhelmed him. "Oh, Mr Leigh, how splendid! I can't ever thank you

enough. And I *am* glad you told me. It was only fair *I* should know."

"Yes. I felt that. But then—I—I hadn't any real right——"

"Hadn't you? I think every man has the right to champion a woman."

"But—I carried it too far. Blake's sneering put my blood up."

"I'm very glad it did! I'm sure Father would approve. But there's no need to worry him—with that kind of thing when he's so far away."

Remembering his own indecision, he pressed the point. "You would rather he didn't know?"

"I'd rather tell him everything. I always do. But he gets so easily bothered about me. And the thing's not really worth it. Mr Blake won't trouble me any more,—thanks to you!"

Her faint emphasis on those three words set a crown on him; but the thought darted like a needle through his brain, "She doesn't want to leave Kohat because of Howard." Aloud he merely said: "You understand—don't you?—that all this is quite between ourselves. Tell Mrs Eden, if you like. But as your father is not to be told, no one else has any concern with my private reasons. They can think what they choose."

She laid a finger on her lip and smiled on him with shining eyes. "It'll be *our* secret!" she said, with the importance of a child. "And when all the others are wondering, I shall love to feel that I know.—Oh! there's Mr Maclean, back from seeing Phyllis home. She pretended it was Phil; but I'm sure she was really afraid of—after supper. He's worse than usual to-night. I rather wish it was him that you'd knocked down; though I don't believe he's as bad inside as Mr Blake."

"And I'm quite sure he's not," Vincent said with conviction. But by now the verandah was beginning to fill up and their talk shifted to less personal matters.

It was not until they rose to return to the ball-room that she exclaimed: "Oh, I forgot. We were to settle about Peter, weren't we? Or have you been too busy knocking people down to think about it at all?"

"I'm afraid I haven't done very much thinking."

She detected indecision in his tone. "Is there really any need?" she asked sweetly. "You can't pretend to be frightened of an audience now! And Pipette would prefer Peter Leigh to Peter Myles—if that's any inducement."

"A very big one," he answered boldly; and she dropped him a shade of a curtsey. "Then shall we say done?"

"Well—I should have to feel very sure that Howard wasn't really thankful to be rid of me, in spite of his polite remarks."

"That's not exactly Mr Howard's way; but we'll make quite sure, just to satisfy your wicked pride!"

On the threshold of the ball-room he held out his hand. "Good-night, Miss Desmond. I'm going home now."

"What! No second supper?"

"No, thanks. I—I've had all I came for," he answered hurriedly.

"Good-night, then. I'm still thanking you ever so in my heart. Don't forget our orgie to-morrow."

He held her hand for the prescribed second as closely as he dared, saw her whirled off by a captain in the Punjab Cavalry; then he turned away and walked straight back to his own bungalow, without a thought of his cap and greatcoat that were left in the cloak-room for Jerry to collect and bring home.

When at length he stood in his familiar room with its litter of books and papers, his brain was still in a whirl. He had a queer, dream-like sense of having returned from the ends of the earth to this his sanctuary, that was a sanctuary no longer. Impelled by that resistless force within, and fearful of disappointing

his mother, he had opened his door a tentative inch or two, and behold the great wind of life had blown it right back on its hinges, and tumbled his ordered mental furniture into a wild and rather exhilarating state of disarray. To-night, for the first time, he had come into violent contact with stark, physical reality; and he was fain to admit that it had produced an effect as bracing and stimulating as a plunge into ice-cold water.

He had learnt more of himself and his fellows from that brief surrender to things primitive, and that one blow struck in the righteous heat of his spirit, than from months of semi-detached looking on. The open door had its sweet and terrible compensations; but already he was aware of a disturbing doubt whether he would ever be able to shut it securely again.

CHAPTER IV.

"Things outward
Do draw the inward quality after them."
—SHAKESPEARE.

NEXT day there was no 'orgie of music' at the blue bungalow. It was Howard who spent the afternoon there, while Vincent sent excuses and regrets. He had been officially requested to call on Colonel St John, and his heart was in his boots.

There had been a rather stormy scene with Eden after early parade. Eden sober had proved less aggressive, but no whit less hostile, than Eden drunk. Despite a sneaking increase of respect for his non-regulation subaltern, he hotly resented Leigh's violent attack on his friend and cool inflexibility towards himself. Parade over, Vincent had listened, with frozen scorn, to praises of Blake, the magnanimous, who admitted impertinence and unprovoked assault, but refrained from details presumably discreditable to his assailant. The conclusion of the whole matter had been a repetition of last night's ultimatum: with the result that Vincent found himself standing awkwardly in Colonel St John's bare, bachelor drawing-room, wondering what on earth the Colonel would say to him or he to the Colonel, and dreading the sound of his firm, deliberate footstep without.

He was not kept waiting many minutes. Colonel St John's whole aspect matched his footstep; and even in the first embarrasssing moments Vincent detected a promising gleam of humour in his eyes.

"This is rather a bad business, Leigh. I am told of a—well, a regrettable accident at the dance last night. *You*, of all people! I am not particularly keen about my subalterns achieving that kind of distinction: and Eden tells me you have nothing to say in the way of justification. What is one to make of that?"

"I—I could say a good deal, sir," Vincent answered, encouraged to frankness by that promising gleam in the Colonel's eye. "But—for several reasons, I would rather not. If Blake chooses to give a distorted impression of things, I must put up with it."

"Did you say that to Eden?"

"No, sir. He is prejudiced in Blake's favour. He would only have taken it for fresh impertinence." By a delicate inflexion he, so to speak, disowned the last word, and the gleam deepened in St John's eyes. He began to be interested in this over-studious subaltern, who could yet strike a blow and keep his mouth shut like a man.

"Sit down, Leigh," he said, and his tone indicated an end of formalities. "You have every right to keep your own counsel if you choose. But, as *I* am not prejudiced in favour of Blake, and as one cannot suppose you had been drinking, I should be glad to hear more of this from your point of view. *Were* you insufferably impertinent may I ask?"

This was an unexpected thrust, but Vincent met it squarely. "Perhaps I was: if it's impertinent to tell a man three years your senior—the unflattering truth."

Colonel St John smiled outright. "'M—that's a dangerous missile to sling at any man's head. Apt to ricochet off a pachydermatous subject! And how about 'unprovoked assault'?"

"I struck the first blow, sir: but not without provocation, as I told Eden at the time."

"I see. And Eden prefers to believe Blake, who doesn't seem to care about explaining things either?"

Vincent smiled. "Neither would I, if I stood in his shoes."

St John was silent a moment, thoughtfully regarding the delinquent who, according to Eden, deserved a severe reprimand. "Then," said he, in his measured tones, "on the whole, you consider yourself justified in having administered the unflattering truth and hammered it in with your fists?"

"Yes, sir. Though I suppose a man isn't ever quite justified in losing his temper—to that extent."

"Well—I could imagine extenuating circumstances! But you evidently prefer to say no more on that head."

Increasingly St John was attracted by this boy's mixture of frankness and reticence, of shyness and dignity. More and more did Vincent detect a sympathy in the air that impelled him to be frank with the Colonel, for whom he cherished a private admiration: and before doubts arose to unnerve him, he plunged.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I would prefer to stand quite square with you, if—if only the others needn't know."

"My dear boy, whatever you say to me will go no further." Colonel St John's eyes were extraordinarily kind. "I admit I'm curious. One didn't expect you to develop along these lines. Frankly, you didn't strike us as being what we call up here 'a Desmond man.' But I've been suspecting lately that Sir Theo Desmond knew very well what he was about, as he generally does."

This did not sound much like a reprimand.

"I'm afraid, sir," Vincent answered, reddening furiously, "that I shall never come anywhere near being 'a Desmond man.' And, as for Blake, there really isn't much to say except that, by chance, I overheard him speaking to—Miss Desmond in a way that would have made any decent-minded man want to knock him down."

"Quite so. And you want to keep her name out of this?"

"Yes."

Again there was a moment of silence. "Well,

Leigh," St John said at last, "I applaud your reticence; but I'm glad to have the facts. I'm afraid I also applaud your action. I should have enjoyed doing it myself. By Jove!" he laughed, his quiet laugh. "Looks as if I was letting you off without a wigging! Have a drink, will you? Or stop and share my bachelor cup of tea? I believe Finlay's going to look in."

Vincent accepted the cup of tea; and spent a very pleasant hour with the two Colonels. St John had had a talk that morning with Fuzl Ali Khan, whose bones were slowly retiring from their undue prominence, and who bid fair to be a credit to the regiment if the lure of adding a fresh corpse to his own reckoning did not make him 'faithless to salt' before his time was up. St John was full of Frontier tales, and, in the opinion of some, a little over-fond of telling them. But this new subaltern listened with such genuine interest, and asked such pertinent questions, that the elder man was still further confirmed in his belief that Sir Theo had known very well what he was about.

Next day St John merely told Eden that he had spoken to Leigh, whose explanation seemed satisfactory; and as Blake no longer demanded an apology, he considered that the matter should be allowed to drop. To a man of Eden's jealous and irritable temper there could be few things more exasperating than this implied approval, however tactfully veiled, of a junior he had seen fit to report: and that night after Mess—it was guest night—he accosted Vincent in his most offensive vein.

"So you've been let down easy? A long sight more than you deserve. But you're so blooming superior; sucking up to Colonels and Generals with your tall talk. Blake's a fool not to insist on an apology. Anyway, you'll have no time now for fooling round with a Munshi so as to impress the Colonel."

The two were standing by a side table in the anteroom. Eden spoke in a vehement under-tone, while Vincent mechanically turned the leaves of the *Graphic*,

and tried to still his rising temper. No effective answer was possible, and he attempted none; but he was thankful for the approach of Howard that checked further recrimination.

Eden moved off a few paces, as the Adjutant drew near, and picked up the *Sporting Times*. There was little love lost between the two; and Howard winked jovially at the broad retreating back.

"Taken in flank—what?" he murmured, adding aloud: "Well, old chap, hope you enjoyed your little tea-party at Headquarters? I saw Colonel Finlay afterwards, and he said you were in great form."

"I don't know about that, but I enjoyed it. The Colonel was awfully nice to me," Vincent answered, wickedly hoping that the information might carry through the screen of the *Sporting Times*.

Howard chuckled. "Thorough good chap, the Colonel. By the way, Miss Desmond sent you a varied assortment of regrets and things. Seemed quite disappointed you couldn't turn up. Really, Vinx, you're blossoming out like blazes. A pugilist and a ladies' man! What next?"

"Oh, drop that, Howard," Vincent muttered hurriedly.

"All serene!" Howard was in very good spirits this evening. "Am I permitted to congratulate you on changing your mind about Peter? Due to Miss Desmond's powers of persuasion—was it?"

Vincent frowned quite fiercely at a portrait of Mr Balfour on the open page of the *Graphic*. "Well—she rather gave me to understand that you'd be pleased if I stuck to the part."

"I implied as much, didn't I? And I knew you could squeeze in rehearsals—if you chose."

The *Sporting Times* crackled ominously. The next moment it was flung down and Eden came towards them. "Sorry to upset your arrangements, Howard," he said bluntly. "But if Leigh thinks he's going to find any time, after to-morrow, for rehearsals, he's very much mistaken."

Howard received the information with a cool lift of his brows. "Tell that to the Marines! I believe I've been through a Musketry course once or twice. Vinx will manage all right if I suit my hours to his. He's doing very well. And I don't care to upset my caste at this time of day."

"Your caste! Long way more important than the men's training, eh? I warn you Leigh won't be much use to you after to-morrow, though you *are* so confounded accommodating all of a sudden."

With that parting shot, obviously aimed at Vincent, Eden disappeared into the billiard-room, and Howard whistled under his breath.

"Well, I'm damned!" he murmured pensively; but Vincent's face hardened. "Look here, Howard," he said, "you'd better leave me out of this piece. It'll only be one prolonged tussle. And it's not worth that —really."

"Well, I tell you it is! You'll be a fool, Vinx, if you knuckle under to a bit of pure tyranny. There's a touch of the bully about Eden when his blood's up, as it seems to be just now. Don't know when I've seen him like this for so long on end. But whatever's up, he's not going to walk over *me* as if I was a blooming probationer. Even if I didn't care a hang about the piece, I'd fight it out with him on principle, for the love of the thing." Vincent's whimsical look of dismay set him smiling. "Poor old Peter! Two bad big dogs snarling over you, and you don't half appreciate being the bone! But you've jolly well got to turn up at rehearsals, mind. And we'll have one to-morrow, specially for your benefit."

Vincent looked forward absurdly to that rehearsal. Though the jar with Eden rankled, there was balm in the knowledge that he was not altogether a negligible item in Howard's production; and when the whole caste sat down to a preliminary tea in the 'auditorium,' Vincent was quite agreeably aware of the friendliness of it all. The reason of their coming

together was frivolous enough: but the mere fact of these frequent, informal meetings had linked them almost into a family group. If you were a 'Creature,' you belonged. If not, you were 'just Kohat.' And to-day Vincent realized that having once 'belonged,' it would have felt rather chilly to become 'just Kohat.' He was very sensible, at that moment, of compensations for the open door, even though he might never be able to close it again. It was astonishing how that five minutes of unexplained and very unorthodox behaviour seemed to have quickened his popularity with all these kindly people, who had none of them the smallest desire to knock a man down. He had a new and rather pleasant sense of being, so to speak, linked up with them all.

But to-day the individual intercourse he craved was denied him. In an hour and a half he had scarcely five minutes' talk with Thea Desmond, for the simple reason that unless Lynn Howard happened to be on the stage without her, he was rarely five minutes absent from her side. Vincent returned with her and Mrs Eden to the bungalow in the hope of better fortune. But several other 'Creatures' accompanied them: and beyond persuading her to play the "Rosamunde" ballet music, he gained nothing for his pains but a few friendly words at parting and an over-long pressure of her hand.

So much for his vision of a closer intimacy, engendered by their exchange of confidences at the dance! This was probably his last free afternoon for two or three weeks. Eden would see to that. And while he spent futile monotonous hours recording hits and misses on the range, Howard would be free to hear her and see her and to press his suit — if, indeed, pressure were required at all.

Striding home through the frosty air, he fell to raging against the universal wastefulness of life: the waste of effort and of time—that elusive, irrecoverable treasure, whose sands are as dust of diamonds: the bitter waste of enthusiasm, of emotion, and high en-

deavour. Of what possible use was it, to himself or to any one else, that his peaceful ambitions should be shattered and his heart scorched by this devouring flame of passion and jealousy, which, on the face of it, could lead to nowhere? Philosopher though he deemed himself, he was still young enough to knock his head vainly against the stone wall of Nature's indifference to the single life. Fit or unfit, futile or fruitful, the pangs he now endured came alike to all, and by those very pangs he had been made one with his kind: a privilege he was scarcely in the humour to appreciate as yet. Rather was he inclined to blame himself for that chink in the door of his sanctuary which had let in all the winds of the world. But for that, he might at least have kept his dream; whereas now neither dream nor reality were his.

That night he returned early from Mess, lit a pipe, and sat down to his table, determined, if only for a few hours, to shut fast the door that had been so rudely flung open two nights ago. But it was very soon evident that the hinges had been damaged and the hasp would not work. The rudiments of Persian, once so alluring, had become suddenly lifeless as dead twigs. That review article begun last week in a spurt of enthusiasm, now seemed an amazingly wooden and bloodless affair.

For a full quarter of an hour at a time his hand would rest on the paper, while between his eyes and the meaningless scrawl on the page there floated vision after vision of Thea Desmond, in those scenes with himself which were at once an exquisite torment and a fearful joy. His brain was alive with images of Pipette: Pipette, at sight of the Sergeant, shrinking almost into his arms, with her—"O my goodness, he's going to salute me! Peter, if he salutes me, I'll scream!" Pipette, with her hands in her pockets, her appealing face perilously near his own, and her *naïve* assurance: "Please, Peter, I can't help it. It's an irresistible impulse—Kiss me!"

The better to be rid of them, he relinquished his

futile assault on the Persian language in favour of an over-due letter to her father: a doubly congenial occupation, owing to his admiration for the man and the knowledge that he could best please him by dilating on the subject nearest his heart. Eden's recent backsliding could not, on the face of it, be passed over without comment; but, for the sake of his wife and the girl who so loved her, Vincent touched on the subject as lightly as honesty would allow, adding that no doubt a stroke of luck on the turf would mend matters surprisingly.

The letter written and sealed, he went to bed well pleased with his achievement, which had successfully banished, for the moment, vain imaginings and still more vain desires.

CHAPTER V.

"An age so blest that, by its side,
Youth seems the waste instead."
—BROWNING.

ON a certain afternoon, a week later, Sir Theo Desmond sat alone in the great leather chair beside his study fire reading, for the second time, a long letter from Thea, just received; and as he read his fingers mechanically worried his moustache.

The groundwork of the man's face still remained astonishingly young, though years and work and responsibility had scored deep lines upon it; had silvered the dark hair at his temples and his chestnut moustache. At this moment the irregular creases between his brows were very strongly marked, and at intervals his gaze wandered from the letter in his hands to a delicate pastel portrait of Thea at thirteen; Thea, with that amazing hair of hers falling in a mass over one shoulder, with the blush of wild roses in her cheeks and the light of imminent laughter in her eyes. That portrait, the work of a famous painter—to whom Desmond had paid more than he could afford at the time—hung above the mantelpiece, beside Michael Maurice's clever portrait of Honor;—as it were the guardian spirits of the place. They presided also over the writing-table, where they were linked by a five-fold screen of four sons and a twelve-year-old daughter, all plainly bearing the Desmond or Meredith stamp.

Keen and ambitious soldier though he was, Sir Theo

Desmond, like many great fighters, lived most deeply through his affections. Though a goodly assortment of books and pictures, of horns and skins, silver cups and polo-sticks, bespoke a wide range of interests and activities, the originals of those seven photographs were, for him, the be-all and end-all, the very core of life. It is this not uncommon touch of the woman, linked with his essential masculinity, that makes the soldier, at his best, one of the most admirable and loveable anomalies of creation.

For Desmond, the years of separation, entailed by Indian conditions, had been a severer trial than they are apt to be for the average father of a large family. Above all, he had felt the long spells of absence from Thea, who, alone of all his children, shared the holy of holies sacred to his wife. And now, judging from the letter in his hand, this radiant 'little girl' of his —still a mere child in his eyes—was already possessed of a lover: a handsome fellow enough, confound him, and one that might well prove the inevitable Other Man, who had no business to put in his appearance for a good five years at least.

The first reading of her letter had left Desmond in a mood to anathematize all the circumstances that had conspired to transport Thea to Kohat; but the second reading, now in progress, tended to convince him that she was not yet alive to the significance of Howard's preponderance in her round of life, and that her prompt removal might at least defer the danger looming ahead.

After all, why should he not have her back? She had been gone nearly six weeks, and he still missed her at every turn. She wrote of a new nursery governess, taken on trial. That would simplify matters. And if further excuse were needed, there were the vaguely disturbing allusions to Eden in Vincent's last letter. Desmond's brow cleared, and he left off worrying his moustache. A fortnight of her would be better than nothing, and she could go back when he started on his annual tour of inspection. He would speak to Honor

at tea-time, when he devoutly hoped they would be alone; he was too little alone with her these days. His quick ear caught the sound of her footstep—and he smiled. It was no uncommon event for her so to answer his thought: and a moment later she appeared.

In the full flower of middle life, Honor Desmond looked nearer her age than did her husband to his. Though scarcely a thread of grey had invaded the coppery tone of her hair, she lacked the alertness, the elasticity of mind and body that kept Theo Desmond perennially young. Her large build, and the natural strain of nobility in her, gave her what is commonly called a great presence — a presence that radiated serenity and strength.

At her entrance Desmond rose to his feet. "Prompter than usual, my lady!"

She smiled and nodded. "I suddenly felt as if you wanted me. Besides, I promised to go and have tea with my little Russells, and I've never shown you Dr Harman's letter about John. You seemed rather swamped with correspondence this morning."

Desmond's brow clouded. "These football accidents are the dickens. Sit down and let's hear what Harman has to say."

She obeyed; and he remained standing, Thea's letter still in his hand.

"He hasn't got very much to say. That's the worrying part of it," she sighed. "He's afraid the spine may be affected, but still hopes he is mistaken. He says John's been growing too fast; and his heart and his nerves are rather overstrained. Poor darling, he's so keen to get into the Engineers that I'm afraid he's been overdoing all round."

Desmond stood silent a moment looking down at her. Then: "I wonder," he said, "ought you to go home yourself?"

She looked up at him quickly, and her glance was a caress. "I've been wondering too. Dr Harman doesn't press it. They all know how I hate leaving you! I think one can safely wait till after the holi-

days. Then, if they're still not satisfied, I'm afraid —I must go. He's ours: no one else *can* be responsible——"

"No. Our complete agreement on that point has been a great source of strength—hasn't it? Thank goodness, my furlough's due in September."

"Yes. And you'll be quite happy with the Darling to fuss over you. Though I flatter myself no one else can do it quite so well as I can!"

At that he leaned forward and laid a hand on her shoulder. "No indeed, you blessed woman! But it's not come to that yet; and I hope it never will. As for the Darling, I'm not at all sure that her father still stands first in her heart."

"Theo! Are you in earnest?" The shadow was gone from her eyes. "Is it—that Mr Howard?"

"Looks like it! I hope it's nothing of the sort." He reopened the offending letter and scanned it in a sudden access of impatience. "He seems very much on the spot. And he's a likely sort of fellow: clever, promising, a trifle of means, and just about the marrying age——"

"Really, Theo, he sounds a remarkably eligible being."

"Eligible be hanged! You women are all of a piece when it comes to this sort of thing. But I won't *have* my Thea married off at nineteen. Where's the use of possessing such a daughter if she's to spend twelve years at Home and be snapped up the moment she sets foot in India. Besides, she's still a baby in herself. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes. Thea's young for her age," Honor admitted serenely. She was used to her husband's inflammability where this child was concerned. "Still—people *have* been known to wait!"

But Desmond was not to be mollified. "You're travelling a deal too fast," said he. "Howard's not the marrying kind. Too much of a lady's man. And a chap who knocks around freely with grass-widows is not the right husband for our Thea. There was that

Mrs Glover in the 3rd P.C., and Mrs Larkin at Simla, only two years ago. You remember?"

Lady Desmond's eyes were grave. "Poor Mrs Larkin! I thought—perhaps I hoped—people made too much of that affair. Was it really this Mr Howard?"

"Yes. They acted together that season, and went home afterwards on the same boat. I wouldn't condemn either of 'em on hearsay. But that's the kind of chap who might hang around an attractive girl, win her affection, and then go off somewhere else. And the man who plays that game with my Thea had better not come within five miles of *me*, if he values his skin.—Anyway, I'm not for running risks; and I vote we have her back again, at least till we start on tour."

Honor's smile had a touch of amused indulgence. "Now we've come to the point! I might have known you were working up to that!"

"Well, it's natural enough, isn't it? And you saw what Vincent said about Eden?"

"Yes. Poor Phyllis! And if we take Thea back just now——"

"That's all square. Phyllis is getting a girl on trial. And I suppose a mere father has some sort of claim to consideration. As it is, I feel a miracle of virtue. I haven't kissed my own daughter for six weeks, and I'm in a mortal hurry to kiss her again! So please arrange accordingly."

Honor's smile deepened at the boyish eagerness of his tone. "Delighted. Your Honour's will is law!"

As she rose to go, the discreet voice of the bearer announced: "*Laren Sahib, Hazúr*," and Desmond's face lit up with pleasure.

"Good old Alan! Back off his Boundary affair already."

"Ask him to dinner, dear. I *must* rush away now. I'm late as it is. Give me the child's letter to ponder at leisure. I don't myself believe in any serious rival to Sir Theo Desmond!"

Alone in her room she decided to give the Darling's letter a careful reading before attending to her 'little Russells'—a pair of 'lame dogs' whom she had been helping over a particularly awkward matrimonial stile. She was seldom without a lame dog or two on her hands, and that not of sheer altruism, as none knew better than herself. She frankly enjoyed playing Providence to those helpless folks who have a positive talent for going astray in the wilderness of life; and her generous heart went out instinctively to the lesser fry, who abound in large stations and are hardly recognised—except at wholesale 'At Homes'—by so great a being as the General's wife. But primarily she devoted her brains and time to such a skilful oiling of her household wheels that the energies her husband needed for greater things were never frittered away in coping with those minor worries that wear out a man's nerves and temper more fatally in India than anywhere else. In this matter Captain Markham and the servants were her faithful allies. The head-groom, the head-chuprassi, and the bearer each received a monthly *bukshish* out of her private purse if they carried through their respective duties without making trouble for the General Sahib, and the sense of co-operation thus engendered was good for all.

Decidedly, therefore, Theo must not be allowed to worry over his Thea. He must see her and satisfy himself that all was well. It would be a joy to have the child and her music back in the house. At the same time it had been an undeniable joy having her man more or less to herself again; a relief to be free of certain disturbing twinges that were obviously not of the present but of the past. Hitherto she had brushed them aside, refusing to analyse them. But to-day she faced the fact that, at times, something in her husband's utter tenderness and chivalry towards Thea too poignantly recalled his old attitude to Evelyn. Not that she grudged this peculiar tenderness to either of them; but that her big, passionate heart craved nothing less than the entire man. For this cause she

was quick to detect, not without envy, that indefinable something—reserved for the young, the weak, or the hyper-sensitive—which she, the strong and equal comrade, naturally failed to call forth. She wondered, pondering on the modern development of women, would they not inevitably lose that peculiar essence of manhood at its best, when they themselves lost the qualities that waked it to life?

But of what import were these large and vague matters, after all, beside the more immediate question of her own child's incipient love affair? Driving leisurely to the other end of the station she re-read the letter that had so perturbed Theo, and decided that the child had not yet discovered the state of Mr Howard's heart or her own. She also decided that something would probably come of it in the end; and, Mrs Larkin or no, she had a feeling that she would like the man. Meanwhile—in spite of Mr Howard, even in spite of Phyllis—Thea must certainly come home to the father who was in such a 'mortal hurry' to kiss her again.

CHAPTER VI.

"Deals she an unkindness, 'tis but her rapid measure,
Even as in a dance: and her smile can heal no less:
Like the swinging May-cloud that pelts the flowers with hailstones
Off a sunny border; she was made to bruise and bless."
—MEREDITH.

VINCENT did not precisely enjoy his fortnight in the butts; nor did he see much of Thea Desmond till it was over. Though he mentally reiterated his resignation to the Howard affair, his deeper self was aware that the process had not so much as begun. Sick to the soul of monotonous days on the range, irritated by large doses of Eden, he fell an easy prey to one of his black moods, in which everything seemed predestined to go awry.

During the first ten days he had managed two rehearsals. He had acted with greater confidence and won praise from Howard; but he had not secured ten minutes' talk with Miss Desmond. On the third occasion, despair goaded him into action. He determined to walk home with the usual Eden party and make his own opportunity, if none were given. Almost it seemed as if his altered mood gave events a tilt in his favour; for during Howard's scene with the Witch, Thea left the stage and slipped into the empty chair beside him.

"Mr Leigh, have you deserted us for ever and ever?" she asked; and the music of her voice sent a pang through him. They were half-way down the room and could talk quietly without disturbing the

actors. "I haven't even been able to tell you that I'm going back to Pindi."

He drew in a quick breath. "Pindi! But why—when?"

"As soon as we've done with the 'Creatures.' Father says it's his turn now, and he wants to see me before they go on tour. Mrs Finlay's going on a visit to Mrs Lawrence and we can travel together."

"It's not—for good?"

"N—no, I don't think so. They didn't mean me to do the camping, anyway; and if it's not them—it simply *must* be Phyllis." She hesitated, then lowered her voice. "I suppose you didn't tell about Captain Eden?"

"I only said he was going through a bad phase. After all, it's natural they should want you."

"Yes. But Father's letter sounds a wee bit worried——"

"Your cue, Pipette," Howard shouted from the stage.

"Come on to the bungalow afterwards. Then I can tell you more," she said, and hurried away.

He did go on to the bungalow, and was relieved to find that most of the 'Creatures' were engaged elsewhere. Only Alton came with them; and Thea, deliberately lagging behind, told Vincent more about her father's letter, that seemed too obviously the outcome of his own: but the sense of having done his duty gave him no consolation whatever. That came later, when the other two sat talking by the fire, and he—choosing a low chair near the piano—drank in Thea's violin music as a thirsty man drinks water.

It was a full week since he had heard her, and he marvelled afresh at the magic of her playing, that seemed simply a part of her radiance, a natural expression of her joy in life. She played her solos mainly by ear—fragments of her mother's music or of things heard at concerts, embroidered and even edited accord-

ing to her mood. In this shyest of subalterns she recognised the true hearer, and responded to that stimulant as no genuine musician can fail to do. She began with her own version of Chopin's Third Ballade, built upon the graceful second theme, and played with a lilting lightness as of fairies dancing. When he asked for the Rosamunde ballet music, her face lit up with pleasure.

"That's *my* favourite. I believe it's yours too."

He nodded, and murmured stumblingly: "It seems somehow to . . . give things a lift; and I always feel as if it's . . . just you."

"D'you really? Well, it *is* just me. That's why it always 'comes,' even when the fiddle's in a cranky mood. There's no fiddle part in the real score. I made it in my heart out of flute bits and 'cello echoes and other lovelinesses that haunted me till I had to work them out as best I could. Mother says *I'm* a Schubert person, just as she's a Beethoven person. I wish you could hear her. P'raps you will some day!—Now let's see if Rosamunde *will* come after all my boasting!"

She tucked the violin and its blue silk pad under her small, determined chin, drew a deep breath, and began to play.

Unquestionably Rosamunde came: a thing of exquisite tenderness untroubled by passion, of purity and delicate strength; young, without youth's crudity or exuberance, and infused with a haunting sweetness too light-hearted for sentimentality, yet more poignant than any plaintive strain.

If Vincent had loved it before, he loved it the more for knowing how much of her own glad, brave spirit she had wrought into those inimitable melodies that surely none could have let through from heaven but Schubert, the Viennese.

When at last she sank upon the piano-stool with a sigh of unfeigned satisfaction, Vincent could only look up at her from his low chair with worship in

his heart. For a mere moment her eyes rested so confidingly in his that it was almost as if their hands had met; and he saw, with a thrill of amazement, a faint flush creep into her cheeks.

"Don't you feel as if—virtue had gone out of you?" he asked very low.

"Oh, I don't know about virtue! But something goes out of me when the thing simply plays itself, as it did just now." Then rather abruptly she changed the subject. "It *will* be nice to get some music with Mother again. She's so splendid. She inspires you no end. And I've got a music-room all to myself down there. Mother calls it the Day Nursery. I call it the Fools' Paradise, because it's the law that when you come in you leave all your worries and business and general crankiness outside the door! You forget you're grown up, and you just be as natural and silly as you please. When Father comes, he's simply my Twin, and we play the fool there like mad, he and I and the dogs. The dear, stately Mother isn't quite so good at it. She prefers to do audience in a sofa stall. Captain Markham's improving; but we only admit rather special people——"

Vincent smiled. "It would need rather special people to fulfil your law!" he said. "There are not many of us who can fling away the years and pick them up again like your father."

"No. It's one of his great talents! Once I begin thinking of *him*, I long to go. But then——" a glance towards the fireplace conveyed her meaning, and her voice dropped lower. "You'll be round here pretty often, won't you?"

"Yes. It's not so easy, since that dance. But I will. And—if I may, I—I'll write just to say how things are going."

"Do! I didn't like to ask. You're always so busy."

"Please don't be sarcastic," he said without looking up.

"Well, Thea," Phyllis called from the fireplace, "hasn't the fiddle recovered himself? Captain Alton wants more."

As she rose to comply, the door opened to admit Eden and Blake, and with a swift movement she slipped her violin into its case. As Blake approached with an affected air of jauntiness she stiffened visibly, gave him the tips of her fingers and a perfunctory smile. But Blake was not thin-skinned.

"Well, Miss Desmond," said he airily, "goin' to give us a tune?" (He pronounced it 'chune.')

"No. I've just finished," she answered, closing the case; and from the fact that Mrs Eden made no comment Vincent concluded that she knew all.

Eden, who had not missed the byplay near the piano, remarked suddenly: "I Hope you've got a decent dinner to-night, Phyllis. I've asked Bobby to come in."

And from the look of puzzled amusement on Blake's face, Vincent further concluded that this was the first Bobby had heard of it. Eden, he felt sure, was merely 'hitting out' at Thea; and the conviction almost reconciled him to the bitter fact of her going.

When he caught up with things again, Phyllis was amicably hoping they wouldn't mind an influx of 'Creatures' after dinner, as Mr Howard wanted an extra practice of songs and dances.

Eden flung up his head. "Howard's infernal theatricals have demoralized the whole regiment. Of course the arrangements of his Highness are sacred!"

"It's quite simple," Phyllis began, but Eden waved the suggestion aside.

"Simpler still for Bobby and me to dine at Mess, where we shan't be a nuisance to any one — eh, Bobby?"

"I'm agreeable, old chap," answered the amenable Bobby, who did not hold the clue to the situation:

while Phyllis made a valiant attempt to give the conversation a more general turn.

It was useless. Eden's outburst made every one feel ill at ease; and very soon Alton took his leave with Vincent. Thea slipped out soon after; and Blake, vaguely aware of being in the way, followed suit.

Eden, standing on the hearth-rug, glanced slowly round the empty room. "Seems to me the only people who aren't welcome in my own bungalow are myself and my particular pal," he remarked.

His tone was injured rather than irritable, and Phyllis, pricked by the consciousness that he spoke truth, laid a hand on his arm. "That's nonsense, Ted," she said gently. "And I'm sorry about this evening. But you so often dine at Mess now——"

"Oh, of course *I'm* to blame. Always am."

"I wasn't blaming any one," she countered desperately. "I only mentioned it because I hate to seem inconsiderate."

Something in her look or tone moved the man who was not yet perfunctorily her husband, though he seemed on the road to that deplorable condition. "You're never that, old girl," he said in a changed voice; and, to her surprise, he suddenly pulled her forward and kissed her with a rather shamefaced tenderness. "You're too much the other way, and Howard's just the sort to take advantage of the fact." He scanned her face with eyes grown suddenly clearer. "What's wrong—eh, Phyllis? You're not half the woman you were two years ago."

"I'm a little run down. Nothing to bother about," she answered vaguely. "And I'm not being fagged. They're so nice, all of them. I enjoy it."

"Oh, well, don't knock yourself to pieces, that's all. But I'll be thankful when these confounded theatricals are over!"

And while Eden looked forward to the end of next

week, for Vincent it grew to seem the end of ends beyond which a precipice dropped into infinity; and his own nervous dread increased as each relentless sunset brought him nearer to 'the night.'

The dress rehearsal—that on the whole went with a good deal of spirit—proved a sufficiently trying affair. Thea Desmond, in a blue frock well above her ankles, a muslin apron, mob-cap, and her cascade of hair rippling to her waist, was a vision to distract a far more experienced lover than Vincent Leigh. He had never forgotten the wonder of her hair on that morning when she had supposed him too shy to notice it; and her face, so framed, looked younger, more appealing than ever. He himself felt miserably awkward and self-conscious in the blue blouse of a peasant farmer; while Howard, resplendent in an old-time uniform and helmet, seemed to stand for the immemorial conqueror of kingdoms and of hearts. Could he possibly, Vincent wondered, let her go back to Pindi without speaking the fateful word? Though how any man ever achieved the feat of asking a girl point-blank if she loved him was more than he, personally, could conceive.

Before they separated Howard signified his satisfaction by inviting them all to a supper in costume after the performance; and it was openly rumoured that by the end of the great evening he and Pipette would be engaged.

But they reckoned without Pipette, who may possibly have had a sudden divination of purpose in the air. At all events, just when he felt most convinced that a word, a touch, would bring her into his arms, Howard found himself lightly and laughingly held at bay. She who had hitherto seemed as natural and transparent as a child, became suddenly volatile as a bit of quicksilver. Do what he would, he could not hold her serious attention for five minutes on end; neither could he, for all his experience, decide whether this new mood was the mere fluttering of a

half-captured bird, or whether the acting and her own unmistakable success had fairly gone to her head. In any case, resistance served as a spur to the man's determination and desire. Where Vincent would have been disheartened and have drawn in his sensitive horns, Howard merely registered a firmer resolve to speak before she slipped away from him for two weeks.

But time was short, and this new Thea, like the spoilt child she was, proved intractable beyond belief. She lay in bed—officially at least—for half the morning after dress rehearsal; refused an invitation to ride with him in the afternoon, on the plea that she would be packing and wanted to keep very fresh for the 'Night.'

And when the night came there was literally no holding her. Howard, the masterful, found himself nonplussed at every turn by a creature ungraspable as a butterfly. She flung herself into her part as ardently as she flung herself into her music and her dancing.

For that evening, she assured him solemnly, she was no longer Thea Desmond. "So it's not the smallest use talking to Thea," she added with a suspicion of a blush. "She's hidden under a bushel. There's only Pipette!"

And such a Pipette! The shy, silly girl of the libretto became in her hands a thing of sheer delight: a creature so ingenuous, spontaneous, and loveable that Kohat thundered its approval again and again. And when she ran off the stage, laughing and flushed with triumph, that approval was echoed in the wings.

There also, in a keroseny twilight of bazaar bracket lamps, she continued to play Pipette with such childish roguery, that Jerry threatened to kiss her outright; and Howard—tempted to distraction himself—nearly knocked him down. Vincent, a prey to very mixed emotions, was pricked by a longing to shield her from herself. She was in truth simply realizing, with sudden vividness, the wonder of being alive and nine-

teen and a girl in a world of admiring men, whose true intent was all for her delight.

At supper she must needs accept the post of honour by Howard; but throughout the meal she flirted egregiously with Roddy, to his mingled embarrassment and joy; and when the "Sikh Squad" escorted them home in the moonlight, she linked herself securely to Phyllis, so that none could snatch a private word with her at all.

Howard denounced the whole thing as "a bit of feminine foolery," and decided that she would have time to come to her senses before his next opportunity arose. Probably success had turned her head for the moment, and no wonder.

Dignity, tinged with temper, withheld him from trying to see her again till the intolerable moment of departure. Then they were all there. Chaff was flying, and not a serious word could be said. He had the satisfaction of crushing her hand so that she changed colour, and of muttering under his breath, "Mind you come back."

"Bad pennies always do!" she retorted, laughing, as she turned to Vincent and said something Howard could not catch.

The hand-shake between the two was close and mutual. A final hug for Phyllis. Then she was in the tonga, fluttering a hand in response to their cheers.

Then she was gone: and for two, at least, among those that were left, Kohat, lacking her presence, seemed suddenly empty and meaningless, like a ring from which the jewel has fallen out.

CHAPTER VII.

"It cannot be that such intensest yearning,
Such fierce and incommunicable care
Starred on your face, as through a crystal burning,
Is wasted on the air."

—HERBERT TRENCH.

ON a grey afternoon of mid-December Phyllis Eden was very much occupied in filling her drawing-room with flowers as if for some festal occasion. Cut roses and chrysanthemums, piled on the *màli's* tray, were being transferred to every available vase and bowl, and during the process Phyllis hummed softly to herself. For the last two and a half weeks she had been reprehensibly slack about her vases. But to-day was not as other days. Thea loved flowers—masses of them: and to-day Thea was returning to Kohat.

It was incredible the blank her absence had left in the house. Small wonder that Theo called her his 'Sunbeam'; for in truth, when she left, it was as if a light had gone out of the house. Phyllis, who at first had found her fervent devotion a trifle overpowering, had succumbed in the end to its evident sincerity; how completely she had not guessed till its warmth and radiance no longer glorified her difficult round of life. The burden of things in general had seemed, during these weeks, to weigh more heavily on her shoulders. Nor was she alone in her troubled sense of something gone that had given light and zest to things quite trivial in themselves. The children, Phil especially, had plagued

her with the reiterate question: "How much longer is it *now* before Aunt Fea comes back?" Mr Howard and Mr Leigh had more or less haunted the bungalow, and, each in his own fashion, talked of Thea, either directly or by very transparent implication; and even Ted had admitted that the place seemed 'less cheery these days.'

A week ago the tentative girl had been dismissed as 'impossible'; and there was no blinking the fact that either some one satisfactory must be found, or her adored Phil must be sent home earlier than need be. Beyond that dread, inevitable day she had never yet dared to look; nor had she dared to ask herself "Why should I not go too?" She knew well enough that the question was answered, in advance, by Ted's lack of money and her own uncomfortable ideal of duty. She knew also that her feeling of blank despair at the bare thought of life without her boy was presumably the measure of her failure as a wife or of Ted's failure as a husband: and these two weeks alone had given her leisure to realize how they had been gradually slipping away from each other since their coming to Kohat.

Barely perceived by either, the insidious process had been going on longer than Phyllis cared to recognise. For these two were nearing that difficult middle period of marriage when the full strain of incompatible union is apt to be most consciously realized; too often with disastrous result.

Faults on both sides had helped to precipitate the present unhappy state of things. Though the man's were admittedly the more glaring, the woman's seemed fated to retard both his chance of improvement and her own chance of happiness when the danger zone was passed. Edward Eden's sins were mainly of the flesh, and of these the finer sort of woman is often more intolerant than of the less gross but infinitely meaner sins of the mind. To Phyllis Desmond, at two-and-twenty, he had appeared a brave, debonnair, and soldierly figure of a man; not the ideal lover of

her dreams, but one who had ultimately succeeded in firing her heart by the very warmth of his own.

On this rather insecure basis she had founded her house of life; and there had followed the slow, unwilling recognition that his manlier qualities were adulterated by a certain slackness of moral fibre, by a nature fundamentally ungoverned, and a love of excitement for its own sake that enhanced the lure of the card-table and the turf. A more tolerant woman, or one whose love had been more active than reciprocal, might have saved him from himself. But Phyllis, with her inordinate pride, her fastidious distaste for every form of gambling and excess, had the knack of making him feel at one moment hopelessly disgusted with himself, at another hopelessly enraged with her. And as neither sensation was fruitful of good, their drifting process had begun full early.

Now, after seven and a half years of marriage, she asked herself bitterly what did their companionship amount to? The sharing of a bedroom at night and perfunctory association at meals. She saw him practically blind to herself and the children, to the struggle with inadequate means that was wearing her out before her time; hypnotized by a lesser man than himself, and worse than all, degrading them both by surrender to the weakness she most abhorred. She attributed much of his recent deterioration to the influence of Blake, who rode his horses and generally managed the racing ventures, whereby both men were to achieve the mythical fortune that freakishly eluded their grasp. Blake had means of his own; and in her heart lurked a fear that money accommodations might be tightening the link between them.

There had been moments, of late, when she had been driven to wonder 'How much longer?' moments when she had scourged herself for accepting as love mere glorified passion unworthy of the name. But in calmer moods she looked upon these lapses with shame. Her own love, though chilled and flung back on itself, was still a thing of genuine tenderness and

loyalty. But his need of it must be overwhelmingly evident if the hidden thing were to win through the barriers of her fastidiousness and pride. They had, in effect, reached one of those deadlocks that can only be ended by a volcanic upheaval or by the resistless attrition of the years—if endurance can hold out so long.

Thus hedged about with anxieties and shadowed by tragedy, no wonder Phyllis welcomed the return of Thea, with her radiance, her devotion, and her incipient love affairs. Now, while she beautified her scantily-furnished room, she was wondering was it possible that the dear child's future might be decided within a few hours? Much as she liked and admired Mr Howard, she frankly hoped that there would be no definite decision—yet. Thea was so very young, and she herself was more keenly alive to the dangers than to the delights of the married state. Still she had promised to give Howard his opportunity, and he could be trusted to make the most of it.

Yesterday he had walked home with her after tennis, and had sat for an hour pouring out his hopes, or rather his determination, with a frankness that slightly surprised her in such a man. He was rather surprised himself, she gathered, at his own complete subjugation by this nineteen-year-old slip of a girl, who, in a few weeks, had overturned all his assured theories of life, and had managed to steal the zest out of almost everything that did not concern her adorable self. The upshot of it all was that he must see and speak to her at the first possible moment. He had been tempted to propose by letter; but that was "such a rotten way of doing things," that he had forced himself to have patience; and now he could stand the uncertainty no longer.

Would Mrs Eden be a brick and ask him to tea? Would she be still more of a brick and give him ten or fifteen minutes alone with Miss Desmond? She had promised to do both, and at parting he had wrung her hand so that she winced.

"I'm awfully sorry," he had said, reddening. It was strange to see Mr Howard change colour. "But you've no idea how keen I am. And I believe it'll be all square—eh? What d'you think yourself?"

"I really don't know," Phyllis had answered truthfully. "Thea, like her father, is more reserved than she seems. But I'm not at all sure that you've ousted him—yet!"

"Her father? Rot!"

"Well, come along to-morrow and find out," Phyllis had answered, laughing. And now very soon he would be here. She had stipulated for half an hour of Thea to herself; but very much doubted if she would get it.

Her flowers arranged, she found fresh occupation for her fingers in embroidering Flop's new overall. But her thoughts were travelling along the tonga road, and her ears were listening for the sound of wheels.

There they were at last! She was on the steps when the tonga drew up; and lo! Thea, in her long blue coat and fur cap, looking as fresh as if she had driven round to pay an afternoon call.

"Oh, my Phyllis!" she cried; and with that cry she was out of the tonga, up the steps, and in Mrs Eden's arms.

Phyllis held her without a word. Then she set her away and smiled at her with eyes suspiciously bright.

"It's beautiful to have you back," she said softly.

Thea sighed. "It's beautiful to *be* back. But, oh, the wrench it was leaving them! I dropped Mrs Finlay at her bungalow——"

She was interrupted by distant shouts and the patter of feet, speedily followed up by two small figures that came tumbling through the chick, seriously damaging it in the process; and a tangle of laughing, kissing human beings made their way, under difficulties, into the drawing-room.

The display of roses, obviously in her honour,

brought sudden tears to Thea's eyes. "You darling!" she murmured, too overcome for much demonstration. "You make this feel quite like my second home."

"That's how I want it to feel. Now Flip, my son, run away to tea. You shall see Aunt Thea before bedtime. It's Mummy's turn first."

Flip, reproachful but resigned, went at the first bidding, a piece of phenomenal virtue; and Thea sank contentedly into her accustomed chair.

"I feel much happier now. But my head's full of tonga, and my throat's full of Kohat dust!"

"Tea will cure both," said Phyllis, taking off her cap and passing a hand over her hair. "It'll be here soon. And Mr Howard's coming in to welcome you. Don't blame me! He invited himself."

The girl's colour deepened perceptibly. "How like him! It will be lovely seeing them all again. But this first afternoon I'd have rather preferred—only you!"

"Tell that to Mr Howard!" laughed Phyllis. "I couldn't refuse the poor man. He seemed in rather a hurry. But I stipulated for time to kiss you."

Surreptitiously she watched the effect of her words. Thea, fingering her first ring—given her by Desmond—received them with her smallest smile, and Phyllis began to wonder very much what Howard's answer would be.

"And—Mr Leigh?" Thea asked, suddenly looking up from her ring. "He didn't invite himself, I s'pose?"

"Not point-blank! So I asked him and the Pocket Cherub to dinner for a reward. Ted's dining at Mess."

Thea nodded approval. "He wrote me two such nice letters while I was away. He comes out wonderfully on paper.—Oh, here's Mr Howard!"

Phyllis detected a nervous little catch in her voice.

"It's rather hot in here, isn't it?" she added;

and rising, took off her coat just as the kitmutgar's '*Howard Sahib*' was followed up by the man himself.

She was wearing the delphinium blue dress in which he had first seen her, and he took it for a good omen.

"Let me," he said, coming quickly forward and taking her coat. Then, without a word of greeting, he shook hands, holding her fingers and looking at her so intently that she averted her eyes. Phyllis came to her rescue with serviceable remarks about the journey, and the arrival of tea created a welcome diversion.

Howard had not failed to notice the slim old-fashioned ring of pearl and turquoise on her right hand. The General, no doubt. But the sight enraged him none the less. His own ring—he had decided on a sapphire, the finest he could afford—should have been the first she ever wore. It was unfair of the General to forestall him.

But by now he had himself in hand. Only, to cover the impatience that consumed him, he talked more at random than was natural to him. Thea, on the contrary, had a slightly subdued air that enhanced her charm; and Phyllis, watching them, decided to give the man his good, or bad, quarter of an hour as soon as the tea-drinking was over.

The children provided a not too transparent excuse. "They shan't keep me long, dear," she added in answer to Thea's look that faintly hinted at reproach. "And you're much too good friends to quarrel while I'm gone!"

Thea laughed softly. "Mr Howard would have to quarrel with himself! *I'm* not in a fighting mood."

"I'm glad of that," said Howard, closing the door on Phyllis and returning to the fireplace, where Thea sat with one foot on the fender-stool and her adorned hand held out to the blaze. The sight of that provocative ring precipitated matters. "It is as well you're not keen on fighting, Miss Desmond, for I'm in a most desperately determined mood."

There was no suggestion of lightness in his tone, and she glanced quickly up at him where he towered above her.

"You're rather alarming when you're desperately determined," she said.

"Not if I get what I want. And I hope—I believe—I'm going to get it this time. But that's for you to say."

Suddenly enlightened, she caught her breath, and the colour flooded her face. "I don't—quite understand," she murmured untruthfully, looking straight into the fire.

But her small attempt to ward off the inevitable failed signally. "You *do* understand. You understand perfectly well. You're no coquette. You can't pretend not to know I'm crazily in love with you. Goodness knows I've made it plain enough all these weeks. And I've had every reason to hope—it was the same with you.—Am I right?"

For a few distracting seconds he stood awaiting her answer, his eyes intent upon the warmth of her cheek and the enchanting lift of her upper lip. He was tempted to kneel down and take his answer straight from her lips. He knew no surer means of dispelling feminine hesitancy; but he knew also that here was neither an Alice Larkin, nor a Mabel Glover, nor even the sort of girl with whom he had amused himself on occasion. Here was something too sacred, too infinitely precious for those forceful methods of persuasion in which he excelled. But he wished to heaven she would speak, and have done with it. He could not tell that her eyes were full of tears and that she was trying her hardest to conquer them.

Before she succeeded his patience ran out, and the better to get near her, he dropped on one knee, grasping the arm of her chair. "Thea—you darling little girl," he said, "haven't you got a word to give me? I want you—I want to marry you. Don't you understand? It's going to be all right, isn't it?"

By way of encouraging the desired answer, he

covered her left hand with his own. But, to his amazement and consternation, she gently withdrew it.

"No—no. It's all wrong. And it's spoilt everything," she said with a pathetic quiver of her lip. "I didn't ever think—of this sort of thing. I didn't, honestly."

"You didn't *think!*" he echoed, pain and reproach in his tone. "You knew what you were doing well enough that night, after the piece, when you behaved like a mad thing and nearly drove *me* mad into the bargain."

She shook her head. "I didn't think, really; I only felt—suddenly afraid of you. And I was so happy. I didn't want anything to spoil it."

"And now?"

She sighed, and spoke without looking up. "I simply hate to seem unkind to you; but—I don't want to belong to you, or—or any one except Father, till I'm ages older.—It's true."

He knew, as he listened to her low, unsteady voice and childlike excuses, how confidently he had counted on immediate acceptance, on Mrs Eden's congratulations, and on writing to the General that very night. And the blow so staggered him that he could only set his teeth, get up hastily, and walk away from her; lest, in spite of everything, he should yield to temptation and take her in his arms. He was sufficiently master of himself to realize that to startle or anger her now might mean the loss of all that he still intended to win.

While she sat over the fire furtively wiping her eyes, he paced the room marshalling arguments and appeals. It was the first time he had ever felt at a disadvantage with a woman; and though the sensation may have been a wholesome corrective to his conceit, it was not a pleasant one by any means. Finally he secured a small straight-backed chair, placed it near her, sat down upon it the wrong way round, and folded his arms on the top rail. The back of the chair was in-

tended for a barrier lest she provoke him further by her irresistible looks and ways.

"Now, Miss Desmond," he said with deliberate quietness, "the cards are on the table and we can talk sense. You have given me crushing proof as to where I stand with you at this moment. It's my turn to show you where I mean to stand before I've done. I don't take this answer of yours for an everlasting verdict. No man who cared twopence for you would be such a fool. You're very young; and just at present you're wrapped up in that splendid father of yours, who spoils you—eh?"

"I suppose he does," she admitted, glancing down at the new gift.

Howard's eyes travelled in the same direction. "Well, it's not fair of him. We fellows don't get half a chance. He gave you that ring, I suppose?"

"Yes. It was his mother's engagement ring. She was Thea too. Father and I are called after her. He meant it for my twenty-first birthday," she went on hurriedly, thankful to get away from the one topic. "But he gave it me now, for a welcome home, instead. It's lovely! I do like rings."

"I thought you did. I'd planned a beauty for you."

In spite of herself she looked up at him and met the full blaze of his passion in his eyes. Again the hot colour flooded her face and she turned hurriedly away.

"No. I'm not going to tell you what it is," he said, and she had not believed his voice could ever be so tender. "It can wait, just as I can, till you are willing to give me something . . . a thousand times more valuable, in exchange."

She sighed. "Oh, why won't you believe me and let it be—like it was before?"

"It *will* be. I was wooing you then and I shall go on wooing you now. I shall go on being with you as much as possible; and I shan't—if I can help it—let any other man step in and win you under my nose. I take it there isn't any one at present, is there?"

"No. I don't *want* any one. I'm quite happy as I am."

"Spoilt child! Sir Theo is to blame for that." Again his deep voice took the thrilling note that stirred her like the D. string of her violin. "But there'll come a day when you will want some one, you jewel of a girl; and I intend to be that some one, no matter if it's five years hence. I'm not over patient by nature. But there *are* just a few things worth waiting for—and you are one. I take it you've got as far as liking me more than a little?"

"Yes, of course. I like *all* of you—ever so."

"Oh, damn!" He swore under his breath, adding aloud with a sudden change of tone—"Thanks very much. We're just a row of nine-pins set up for your ladyship's pleasure, and there's not a brass button to choose between us?"

"I didn't mean that. You know I didn't," she reproached him softly. "I think you're rather unkind."

"And *you're* enough to drive a man crazy with your woman's beauty and your child's point of view. You appear chock-full of tenderness and sympathy. But I might just as well have offered my heart and life to a stone on the rifle-range for all the impression I seem to have made on you. And I was fool enough to believe——"

Self-pity mastered him. He felt the stabbing of tears under his lids, and rather than she should see them he bowed his head upon his arms.

There followed several minutes of strained silence. Thea—amazed, yet half frightened at the subjugation of this strong man—leaned forward at last, in desperation, and let her fingers rest lightly on his hair.

"Please, *please* don't be so miserable because of me." There was a quiver in her low voice. "I'm not a stone on the rifle-range, truly, and I can't bear to make you unhappy."

Her touch thrilled through the man; he flung up

his head and caught her hand. "Promise to marry me then, and before God, I'll be the happiest fellow in India."

This was worse than ever. "But I can't. You know I can't. It wouldn't be right, when I don't even know how to care—that way."

"Give me half a chance, and I'll teach you fast enough." His eagerness had something boyish about it that made her feel suddenly older, like a mother comforting an unhappy child.

"Well, of course—if you ever did manage to teach me," she admitted, letting her eyes rest for an instant in his, that were not blazing now. "Then I could promise—what you want; though I can't think why you want it so badly."

She glanced, with faint reproach, at her imprisoned fingers, and for answer he pressed the cool, soft palm of her hand against his lips. Then he released them, and she looked curiously at the spot he had touched as if half expecting that some impress must have been left by that burning kiss.

With a great sigh Howard rose to his feet. "Well, we must leave it at that," he said quietly. "I'm to have you . . . if I can win you. Now I'll go, before Mrs Eden comes. I don't feel like facing her at present. Say what you please to her. I asked her to give me this chance. I was in such a mighty hurry, you see. But I've got to learn patience somehow, while you're learning the other thing—my Thea."

"No, no. You mustn't call me that," she said, and there was pain as well as pleading in her tone. "You haven't the right."

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, I'll wait till I've earned the right; and I'll see you to-morrow—Miss Desmond."

Then, deliberately collecting his cap, stick, and gloves, he went out by the verandah door, leaving her alone among the roses with her woefully bewildered heart. Her head was throbbing, her whole being in a tumult. For, with all her gaiety and good temper,

she was a highly-strung, excitable creature like her father.

For a few seconds she remained standing where he had left her, trying to realize that she had come back to a new Kohat, a new Mr Howard, possibly also a new Thea, for all she could tell—as yet. Since she had seen her chief friend and favourite partner suddenly transformed into a passionate lover, making urgent, impossible demands of her, nothing seemed too strange to happen. Very slowly she went back to her chair, leaned her face against the cushion and closed her eyes, while the tears stole unheeded down her cheeks.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Then did the blood awaken in the veins
Of the young maiden . . .
Then the blood cried to her,
'What art thou making, maiden, of thy youth?
What wilt thou make of me?'"
—*Bard of the Dimbowitza.*

It was thus that Phyllis found her, when she came in a few minutes later. Hurrying forward, she knelt down and gathered the slender, quivering thing into her arms.

"Child, my child," she crooned, stroking the bright head that nestled against her own. "It was a shame to spring a proposal on her the minute she stepped out of the tonga! Did you have to hurt him very badly?"

Thea nodded.

"Was it—a very decided 'No'?"

Thea shook her head. "He wouldn't take it. That's the trouble." Then she looked up and impatiently brushed aside her tears. "Oh, Phyllis, *why* do we have to do these horrid kind of things?"

"Well, you precious Baby, you wouldn't have the men snatch us up and marry us without asking our leave? At that rate you'd be Mrs Howard in less than a week!"

"Oh dear, I *am* an idiot! But I'm so miserable, and it's spoilt everything. Even if he keeps quiet, I'll always feel he's waiting and watching for something that perhaps will never come. Then there'll be all this misery over again. And I—I do *like* him so. I think he's splendid in lots of ways."

"That's not enough," Phyllis said decisively. "I know it's hard to feel responsible for a man's unhappiness. But they get over it—most of them; though it hurts badly at the time. And in marriage—you need to be very sure of your foundations."

She could feel the girl's eyes on her face; and it cost her a very real effort to step so near the edge of her own pain. But Theo and Honor had confided their treasure to her care; and she knew too well that half the tragedies of marriage spring from ignorance. "If you ever feel that you couldn't endure to live without Mr Howard," was her final verdict, "then you can accept him. Not before."

Thea pondered that statement. "I don't seem to think I *could* ever come to such a pass, so long as there's Father," she said.

Phyllis smiled.

"You will all the same, dear, one day."

"Will I? Well, I'm in no hurry! And I don't think Father is. I wish to goodness Mr Howard hadn't been either. I was so happy till he came."

"I don't suppose he's very happy at this moment," put in Phyllis by way of gently correcting a tendency to self-pity.

"No. I'm sure he isn't." Thea gazed at the small chair he had used, and saw, in her mind's eye, the man's bowed head and shoulders that had brought her dangerously near to consent. "And he's rather a proud sort of man too. It must be horrible to feel you're not wanted by the person you want most in the world. I think I won't tell even Father —just yet. It somehow doesn't seem fair on poor Mr Howard."

"No, it's not fair. One doesn't talk of it," Phyllis said quietly.

"But he said I could tell you, because you knew everything," she paused, nervously twisting her ring. "He's so fine and so strong, he could almost make you imagine you *did* care——"

"That's just what you have to guard against," Phyllis told her, and she sighed.

"What a tangle it all is! And I've got *such* a headache, which isn't my way."

Phyllis drew her close again and kissed her. "Darling, I'm just going to put you to bed for an hour. Come and be tucked up."

"I'm not a bit sleepy," Thea protested feebly, when the tucking up process was complete. But in less than five minutes she was off; and she slept so soundly, for a couple of hours, that her first waking thought was "Where am I?" and the next, "What was it that happened?"

Then it all rushed back upon her that a man had actually asked her to marry him and would quite probably ask her again. Worse still, one seeming friend having so comported himself, must she henceforth regard them all as so many human powder-magazines who might explode at any moment, as Mr Howard had exploded this afternoon? She dismissed the idea as conceited nonsense, and condemned the hapless Howard for putting it into her head. Yet the event was a milestone in her life. It made her feel years older, and quite uncomfortably responsible.

But it was late. Things practical claimed her attention; and springing out of bed, she discovered that it was time to dress for dinner.

She chose her moon-coloured frock. Phyllis had told her that Mr Leigh admired it; also the colours matched her pearl and turquoise ring, the thought of which set her speculating about Mr Howard's ring —the 'beauty' he had planned in advance. For her, the appeal of jewelry—the gleam and the colour of it —was irresistible; and at the moment she found her thoughts more actively concerned with the rejected ring than the rejected lover. Again shame overwhelmed her, and again Howard bore the blame.

What spell had he put upon her in that quarter of an hour which had so bewilderingly changed the

whole aspect of things? She was too little introspective to realize that Howard's controlled passion, even while she shrank from it, had struck a chord in her being hitherto untouched; and she had been neither woman nor human had she altogether failed of response. The abrupt, vehement revelation of his love, his strong resolve, even in the face of refusal, could not fail—true daughter of Theo Desmond as she was—to stir her imagination and her heart. For all that, she was still child enough to resent the intrusion of things calculated to mar the unperplexed joy and faith in life which she unconsciously regarded as her right. So, while dressing for dinner, she thrust the suffering Howard from her mind, and welcomed the prospect of an evening with the Pocket Cherub and Mr Leigh, neither of whom could be even remotely associated with explosions.

Cheered and refreshed, she hurried on with her dressing; wondering a little that sounds of arrival had not been followed by voices in the drawing-room, though her own door, that led into it, was ajar.

When at last she pulled it open, and lifted the padded curtain, the reason was revealed.

Vincent Leigh stood alone on the hearth-rug, with his back towards her, absorbed in a small book propped against the edge of the mantelpiece. Evidently he had not heard her step; and for a few seconds she stood there watching him, realizing him, as he appeared when untroubled by the effort to be as he was not; realizing also that she was very decidedly glad to see him again. Though he was neither so forceful nor full of life as Mr Howard, his bearing had about it a suggestion of dignity and of unobtrusive pride that stirred her in quite a different fashion. He gave her a sense of depths beyond depths, of a country difficult to explore that might prove well worth exploring. There was nothing indecisive about his loosely knit figure, and she liked the shape of his head, with its thick dark crop of hair that 'fitted so well' across his forehead and in the nape

of his neck. And to-night—seeing all things with new eyes—she saw him not merely as Mr Leigh, but as a man who might one day tragically proffer his heart to a stone on the rifle-range as poor Mr Howard had done that afternoon.

These swift reflections, or rather impressions, had flashed through her brain in a couple of minutes. Now she suddenly felt she had no right to stand there watching him, though she rather enjoyed it, and was quite sure he did not want to be disturbed.

"Mr Leigh," she said softly, as she went forward to greet him.

He started, dropped his book, and turned on her a face alight with welcome.

"Miss Desmond!" was all he could say; but as he grasped her hand there ran through her a little tingling shock, and she decided straightway that what she liked best of all about him was his smile, and the look in his eyes.

For the fraction of a minute they stood so, simply smiling at one another, and Vincent seemed to forget that he had not released her hand. At the sound of footsteps he dropped it rather hurriedly; then stooped to rescue his book; and as he stood up again Phyllis entered the room.

While he was explaining to her that Jerry had been detained and begged her not to wait, Thea stood by flushed, silent and happy, marvelling at this fresh manifestation of the unexpected. It seemed to her as if some magical flash of understanding had passed between them; something secret and beautiful that never could and never need be put into words.

Jerry made his appearance just as they were sitting down to dinner; and Thea caught herself wondering if he too had any surprises up his sleeve. But she found him still the same Pocket Cherub, flippant, irrepressible, and frankly overjoyed at her return.

"The station's been as dull as ditch-water, and the whole Regiment's had a chronic fit of the blues," he told her with a solemn wink at Vincent, which that

gentleman sternly refused to see. "Poor old Howard's been eating one course less at dinner this last week!"

The allusion to Howard was distressing; but she felt almost as thankful for Jerry's nonsense as did Vincent himself. Prospects of leave and the Lahore Christmas week were in the air. The talk was of polo matches, tennis championships, and racing. Eden and Blake, with their joint stable, were going as a matter of course. The Sikh polo team was reported in good form. Jerry had entered for a tennis tournament and inter-regimental sports, and had devised a 'fetching kit' for the great Fancy Ball.

"I suppose you're going too?" Thea asked Vincent, and was absurdly glad when he answered in the negative.

"The Major and I between us have got to keep the remains of the Regiment together," he said. "Mrs and Miss Williams go of course."

"And oh, my Aunt, the dresses!" cried Jerry, flinging up his hands. "We've been treated to a few in advance. Really, Miss Desmond, you did ought to come too."

But Miss Desmond did not feel at all disposed to quarrel with her lot. She quite looked forward to her fortnight alone with Phyllis and the babies. It was as much a matter of course that Phyllis would remain behind as that Eden would go. She had not been to the Lahore Christmas week since the third year of her marriage; and she had no longer any wish to go. She would feel out of tune with the whole thing.

The men stayed late. There was a good deal of music, contributed by Jerry and Phyllis as well as by Thea herself, and there was another tingling thrill in her veins when she said "Good-night" to Mr Leigh.

"He *is* rather a nice person, isn't he?" she remarked when the two were gone; and Phyllis was clever enough not to suppose that the pronoun applied to Jerry.

"A particularly nice person," she agreed, smiling. "Have you only just discovered the fact?"

"No. But I seem to have discovered it rather more while I was away. Perhaps it was only—that he felt restful after poor Mr Howard."

Phyllis's smile deepened. "Perhaps it was," she said, slipping an arm round the girl's waist. "And I seem to have discovered that *this* particularly nice person ought to have been in bed half an hour ago! Come along."

Thea woke next morning to something very like a changed world: changed, at least, in respect of the two men who occupied the foreground of her interest. Within the last twenty-four hours life had become more complicated and unquestionably more exciting, by reason of hidden uncertainties and curiosities and those new stirrings within herself that filled her with a half puzzled, half fearful joy.

The dreaded discomfiture of meeting Howard as usual proved mercifully transient. The man had tact, self-control, and a deep consideration for the feelings of this gallant, happy-hearted girl, whom he had so strangely failed to win. In the bitterness of his disappointment he no doubt suffered just punishment for thoughtlessly inflicted pain; but he suffered it with the quietness and courage of a strong man strongly upheld by hope. Before he left the station Thea found that she could talk to him almost as naturally as in unenlightened days: almost, but not quite. That burning kiss had, unsuspected by her, left its intended impress on a nature keenly responsive to affection in every form; and in these vital days, when her womanhood was unfolding imperceptibly as a flower, it conspired with the knowledge of his inextinguishable hope to enhance the interest of the man in her eyes.

All these things she accepted as part of the increasing wonder and mystery of life: even as she accepted the strange, intermittent thrill that had invaded her

friendship with Mr Leigh. Not recognising it yet as a means to an end, she was content simply to enjoy it without afterthought or vain peerings into the future. Meantime her genuine devotion to the children and to Phyllis was strengthening and deepening her nature; making those very demands on her which Honor, in her wisdom, had seen that she needed for the true fulfilling of her character and her charm. She was honestly glad to be spending her Christmas with them, and incidentally glad that the programme would no doubt include seeing a good deal of Mr Leigh.

As for Eden—though he had not been quite so 'troublesome' lately, she saw him go with unfeigned relief, and rather suspected that Phyllis did likewise in her secret heart.

Unhappily she was right. But in Phyllis's case the sensation included Blake, whose increasing tendency to pay her marked attentions—always behind Eden's back—put her in the awkward position of either appearing to accept them, or of offending the man who seemed to have hypnotized her husband. It was degrading to think that the peace or purgatory of the near future hung mainly on winners of certain Plates and Purses down at Lahore.

CHAPTER IX.

"I am a stranger in a strange land;
Thy breath comes to me whispering an impossible hope,
Thy tongue is known to my heart as its very own:
O Far-to-seek! O the keen call of thy flute!
I forget, I ever forget that I know not the way, I have not the winged horse."

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

"LOOK at them! Aren't they too beautiful for anything? I drove all round the station this morning and commandeered them wherever I found the right shades, and I'm rather proud of the result. Please congratulate me!"

The result in question was two great baskets piled with chrysanthemums, ranging from palest yellow through gold to bronze: the best that Kohat could produce in the way of Christmas decorations. For it was the 24th of December; and an indefatigable Padre—whose parish included six hundred miles of border country—was due at Kohat for Christmas. Thea had offered to 'take over' the Church if she might be allowed to have things all her own way: a favourite stipulation; and her appeal was addressed to Vincent, who had fallen into a habit of dropping in after tiffin on the chance of tennis or a ride. He now boldly offered to go over and help to arrange the spoils of Kohat, if he would not be too much in the way.

"I don't *think* you would be!" she said, trying to regard him critically and not succeeding in the least. "But I don't deserve to have you, 'coz I said 'No' to

poor Mrs Ryan, when I knew she was dying to come and muddle round just to pass the afternoon. I'm always so sorry for that 'pass-the-afternoon' kind; but still—I knew she'd chatter the whole time, and I hate people who chatter in church. It isn't affectation"—she hesitated and looked down at her flowers—"There really *is* some great mysterious Presence in a church, isn't there? Specially an empty one. You can feel it all through you."

"I wish I could!" Vincent answered with such evident sincerity that she forgot her shyness and looked up with sympathetic concern.

"Can't you—ever? I wonder why?"

"I'm afraid I browsed on so many philosophies at Oxford that I slipped away from my original foothold—such as it was; and I—I've not yet found another."

"I've noticed you don't often come. But lots of men are casual in that way. I suppose it's one of their many privileges!"

Vincent smiled. "I don't know about privilege. And they're often not so casual inside as they seem. But when one's cursed with a spirit of doubt and probing, one's got to work through it to something graspable—if one can. I didn't come here, though, to bore you with that sort of thing."

"But it doesn't bore me. It's real, and . . . it's you! I wonder—are you working through to 'something graspable' by qualifying to be a fakir, as—Mr Howard said long ago?" She was still apt to hesitate over his name; and vexation at her own stupidity brought a rush of colour to her cheeks: a phenomenon that Vincent could not fail to notice, or to misunderstand.

"Howard was talking nonsense," he said with a touch of annoyance.

"Was he? I'm glad to hear it! Now, shall we go? I'm taking Flip, too, chiefly to keep him away from Phyllis. She's shut up in the study struggling with the year's accounts; and she won't let me help, though I begged ever so."

They walked across, the three of them, to the ugly little cantonment church set about with fine trees, now most of them yellowing or half bare. There was no suggestion of Christmas in the blazing afternoon sun, the white dusty Mall bordered with sheesham trees and great beds of autumn flowers; and in the porch the *màli's* fine assortment of evergreens was brightened by no blood-red berries to remind them of Home.

Thea took out a handful of deepest gold chrysanthemums and held them against the dark background. "I really like that better than holly and sugared cotton wool. Of course the red is fiery and brave, the real heart colour; but my yellows are for glory and triumph and gladness; and that's even more right for a church sacred to the spirits of the dear dead officers whose names are all over the walls. It's just those brass plates and the tattered old colours in the chancel that make this ugly little place more beautiful to me than the grandest cathedral. But you know how silly I am about soldiers."

To Vincent it was the spirit of the living girl rather than of the dead soldiers that made Kohat Church, on that unforgettable Christmas Eve, a shrine of things unspeakably beautiful and holy. As he watched her moving about within the altar rails, he came very near to sharing her sense of some great mysterious Presence; so near, that for a few moments his own spirit was lifted, on the wings of aspiration, into the region of unspoken prayer. She, meanwhile, was arranging her trophies in a semi-circle of blazing gold; and as she came smiling towards him his exalted spirit fluttered back to earth.

"D'you like it?" she whispered. "It's a very rough attempt at the rising sun. No one else will know; but you and I will. Now, I think a cross for the reading desk and a star for the pulpit—a big one. I'm counting on you to help make it an improvement on my sun!"

Phil—who had been laboriously spelling out names

and regiments on the tablets—was requisitioned to help bring in evergreens. Phenomenally obedient to his adored 'Aunt Fea,' he tiptoed up the aisle, spoke in mysterious whispers, and only permitted himself the minutest of smiles. As a matter of fact he was acting a part and thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Doesn't he look like a sanctimonious cherub?" Thea said when he was safely out of hearing. "He's just twice as good when his father's away. I believe half his naughtiness is simply nerves; and I'm afraid he's the kind that'll have a very bad time at school."

"Yes. He's bound to," Vincent answered feelingly. "I was that kind—so I know."

He was fastening to the pulpit a skeleton framework of their star: and Thea let her eyes linger on the grave concentration of his face. She was familiar enough with boys to realise the sort of misery they know how to inflict on the sensitive, and a wave of mother-tenderness surged through her at thought of the hundred minor torments that such as he must have endured. She wanted to know ever so much more about those difficult days. Two months ago, even a month ago, she would have questioned him frankly. To-day, because her curiosity was tinged with something else—something she had not yet admitted even to herself—shyness fettered her tongue; and for some time they worked on in silence broken only by occasional remarks, each keenly aware of the undercurrent emotion that neither suspected in the other. Once, as Thea held a spray, while Vincent tied it into position, his hand accidentally pressed against hers, and so swift was the response in her veins that she felt as if he must be aware of it. Yet it was not so.

When at last they stood away a little to admire their joint handiwork, it was near sunset.

"That means tea-time, I suppose," Thea remarked, suppressing a sigh. "But I'm not bothering much about tea to-day. Are you?"

"Not in the least," answered Vincent with quite unnecessary emphasis.

"Then let's have a Declaration of Independence and tell our insides they must do without! I'd much rather finish my job; and Phyllis is going to Mrs Skene's to help decorate a *bonâ-fide* Christmas tree they've got from Lahore for all the babies of Kohat. Phil can easily run home alone. I'm not victimising you? True?"

For answer he looked her so directly in the eyes that she blushed and lowered her own.

So they dismissed Phil and worked on, through the brief twilight, in a flutter of happiness too exalted for speech,

By the time they left the church, dusk had deepened to darkness, the keen, frosty darkness of northern India; and a moon, near the full, hung low and red just above the tree-tops of the Mall. Still in silence, and with that unacknowledged thrill between them, they set out on their homeward walk. To Vincent it seemed that this, at last, was his hour; perfect, unsought for, a genuine gift from heaven. As on that evening of the dance, an acute sense of her nearness overwhelmed him; and her silence enhanced the effect. It was almost as if their hearts were seeking a way to each other through the light impenetrable veil between.

Never had Vincent felt so strongly impelled to risk all on the chance that the faint, unmistakable change in her might spell hope, however remote. But the silence lengthened and the blue bungalow drew relentlessly nearer, and still he could find no words in which to tell that which was beyond telling. The Nemesis of temperament, intensified by habit, laid on him an iron hand that it would need more volcanic conditions and a more commanding passion to shake off at will. From boyhood he had shirked the spoken explanation, the spoken word of feeling: and now, when his heart yearned to express all that was deepest and purest in it, his lips refused their

office. He would wait till they reached home. Indoors, speech might seem less appallingly difficult than out there in the open road. So hoping, he let slip the moment that would conceivably have made her his own.

As for Thea, innocent of any impending crisis, she was simply enjoying what seemed to her the quintessence of companionship enhanced by those intermittent flashes of an emotion that went deeper than interest and lent a new flavour to life. Blindfold, she hovered on the verge of the Great Discovery. A touch, a passionate word, had sufficed to flash the truth upon her. But neither was forthcoming: and when at last she broke the spell that held them, it was to talk of the children and Mrs Skene's surprise Christmas tree.

In the verandah there was a moment of mutual hesitation. "Is it Munshi day?" Thea asked softly, "or—are you coming in?"

"The Munshi is having a holiday," he answered in the same low tone. "And I'd like to come in, if I really may."

"I believe you may!" she answered, and went quickly on before him into the drawing-room. A blazing log fire filled the place with restless lights and shadows, and Thea ran towards it with a little shivering sound.

"Oo-oo, I'm cold," she said, and crouching on the fender-stool held out her frozen hands to the blaze, that edged her fur cap with light and picked out gleams of gold in her hair. "D'you want a lamp? I can light the standard."

"No, thanks. I far prefer this." Vincent had followed her and now stood close to her with one foot on the fender-stool.

"So do I." She glanced up at him where he loomed above her in the half light. "I love a fire! It seems to me the most living of all the things we call dead. But after soaking in your Roumanian ballads, *nothing* seems dead." She crooned under her breath "The

Song of the Fire," part of which her mother had set to an old folk melody:

"I consumed the deep green forest,
With all its songs;
And now the songs of the forest
All sing aloud in me."

While she sat there crooning and warming her hands, Vincent was spurring his courage to the point of sitting down beside her, taking possession of those hands and saying — he knew not what. She was irresistible in her exquisite unconsciousness, which he felt perversely reluctant to dispel. He even had need to remind himself that without destruction there is no step forward; and that step must be taken at all costs.

But the minute he moved, she looked up and spoke; and her words revealed that she had slipped miles away from him, near though he was to her.

"I'm wondering *so* what my Two are doing this very minute," she said. "And I'm rather aching to be with them, now there's the feel of Christmas in the air."

If the spell of the moonlight had induced silence, the spell of the firelight seemed luring her to confidential talk. "I suppose it's bad of me," she went on, seeming to address the flames rather than the silent figure at her side, "because they're perfectly happy with each other, while poor Phyllis would have been very lone up here, in spite of the children. Sometimes I can hardly bear to think of the difference between there—and here. The dear, proud Phyllis would be quite angry if you called her miserable: but what else *can* she be most of the time? Always struggling with money and muddles. Always sitting on the edge of a live volcano. I suppose she *was* in love with him once upon a time. Sometimes I believe she is, even now. That must make things all the worse. Lately they hardly seem to speak to each other more than they can help. Just as well, perhaps:

but still—" She shook her head at a blazing log, —"it does make one think and wonder a lot—about marriage——"

"Does it make you feel—you'd rather not?" Vincent asked very quietly. This was no moment for him to speak but to hear; and just so long as she could be induced to reveal her thoughts—on this subject of all others—in that musical, low voice of hers, he was content to listen entranced.

She smiled at his question but not at him. "I don't think any daughter of Mother's could feel that. It's only . . . I've been wondering, doesn't this kind of muddle often happen because, when a man loves some one, he feels so sure he must be able to understand her and—make her happy; sure enough, sometimes, to make her almost believe he's right. And then she probably finds out her mistake—too late. I think it must have been that way with Phyllis, from something she said once about making very sure of your foundations."

It was one of Vincent's greatest assets—though he did not guess it—that his habit of silence enabled her to express her shy, half-formed ideas to him in this fashion. Neither could he guess that behind her real concern for Phyllis lurked the haunting knowledge of Howard's determination so to convince herself. He only heard in her halting sentences an unconscious indictment of Vincent Leigh. Half an hour ago his own love had suddenly seemed a thing omnipotent, capable of any miracle could it but attain to possession. Now he stood rebuked by the dictum of Nineteen; and because Nineteen happened also to be Thea Desmond, he accepted that dictum without question, though not without a sharp contraction of the heart. Was not his mother's first marriage only another instance of that same conviction and its tragic failure?

"Yes, I imagine you are right," he said slowly. "And not in Mrs Eden's case alone." Then, having conquered his mad impulse—as he now deemed it—he drew up the small chair that Howard had used as a

barrier and set it down a little way from her, so that he could watch, undetected, the play of firelight on her face and hair. "My own father made much the same mistake. But then my mother is a very difficult subject—like myself," he added with his rueful smile.

"Your mother?" She turned on him a face of eager interest. "I've longed to know more about her—if you wouldn't mind? I've told you lots and lots about mine! You see, I'm so devoted to Uncle Paul. I used to threaten I'd marry him if Mother wouldn't let me marry Father! In fact, when I was about five, I made up my mind to marry them both. Father overheard me confiding this grand scheme to Paul, my brother, who was very shocked, and said solemnly: 'But, Thea, that would be awfully wicked. God wouldn't let you.' I said: 'I don't care about God.' Then Father heard a still more solemn voice say: 'Well, the *law* wouldn't let you.' And that finished me. I burst into tears and said I'd try and manage with Uncle Paul. Now he's thrown me over and I do want to hear about the real Mrs Wyndham. I hope there's not been a grain of a mistake this time."

"Not a ghost of a grain," Vincent assured her, smiling. "I can vouch for that."

"Is she rather . . . like you?"

"Yes. In some ways." He hesitated, then drew a letter-case from his breast-pocket and handed her a small photograph lately received.

Holding it near the fire she studied it in silence, while his eyes took their fill of her face.

"I believe—I should just love her," she said very low.

"And I know she would—love you," Vincent answered in the same key.

It was almost as if they had made a mutual declaration under cover of a third person six thousand miles away; and the man's sternly repressed hope stirred afresh. Moved by her direct appeal and the magic impulsion of firelight, he began to talk as she had not heard him talk yet:—of his mother, of her tragic dis-

abilities and her great loneliness: and while Thea sat listening, with half-averted face, a conviction came to her that in his impersonal fashion he was also revealing his own. He spoke of Tintagel, of the cliffs and the sea and the wind, that had been as companions to him from very early days. And through it all there ran the same underlying impression of a loneliness infinitely pathetic and almost incomprehensible to this girl who had lacked no tie of blood, and whose nature had blossomed like a flower in the sun of human companionship and love.

She listened very quietly, looking into the fire. Only when there came a longer pause than usual a word or two would lure him on; and very soon he found himself speaking quite simply and naturally—as he had not spoken since that moonlight walk with Wyndham — of the conquering shadow that had thwarted and repressed him at every turn, debarring him from the amenities and careless joys of youth. He could have devised no surer means—had he but guessed it—of pleading his cause with this girl, whose very capacity for devotion made her the less ready to break familiar home ties in favour of an importunate stranger, however alluring. Such a stranger Howard still was to her, for all his wooing; while Vincent, an unconscious strategist, was undermining the fortress from within.

So, unobtrusively, she drew him on toward her chief point of interest, his choice of a career and Paul Wyndham's part in that momentous decision. To her, a devotee confessed, he could reveal something of his private enthusiasm for the man who had so miraculously renewed his mother's life and altered the course of his own.

"Even now, looking back to that summer," he went on, "I marvel at all he succeeded in doing for two people so difficult to help as my mother and myself, just by his inexhaustible understanding and patience and tact. It is men like Colonel Wyndham and your father who confirm one's belief in personality, not

only as the crowning point of creation, but as the great driving force of all human progress towards the heights."

She nodded, vaguely stirred by his generalisation, but more deeply stirred by his tribute to the two men whom she loved best in all the world. "They *are* rather splendid sort of people," she said, harking back, woman-like, from the general to the particular. "And if you feel like that, you surely won't undo all Uncle Paul has done for you by giving up the Army—will you?"

The question of questions was out at last: and her heart quickened as she waited for the answer.

"I could never undo that. And as to leaving the Army—I'm afraid I can't give a straight answer yet, one way or the other." Her insistence set him wondering did she care so much, or was she merely curious like most of her kind? "I know that sounds 'wobbly,' and you're down on wobbliness. But after all I've been saying, you may possibly—understand."

"Yes, I do—partly. Not quite. You see, I feel it's simply *the* profession for a real man. Of course other professions are fine and other work must be done. But for me, myself, the word 'soldier' is the greatest word in the language."

"Even greater than—saint?" Vincent ventured, his eyes intent on her glowing face.

"Well—the best sort of soldier often comes near being a saint, and the best sort of saint has often been a soldier. After all, it's just as noble to fight God's battles as to keep God's peace. And though they seem so different, those two, they've a great deal in common. Their work isn't mere work just for themselves. It's service—duty. Those words alone are enough to give soldiering a lift; only they've got so hackneyed that hardly any one thinks of their meaning any more than when they say good-bye. But the meaning's there all the same; and the crown of their duty and service is that when the bad moment comes they lay down their lives—willingly—for all those

others who can peacefully carry on their work and pleasure just because the soldiers are there. Of course it's the same with the sailor. Only I happen to be a soldier-woman; so the mere word goes through me like the call of a trumpet. Does all that sound to you —just fantastic nonsense?"

In the face of her irresistible enthusiasm and idealism—that were Sir Theo's own—mere argument seemed profanation.

"It's the sort of 'fantastic nonsense' that makes life worth living and death worth dying. It is evidently your father's point of view. But the Army is not made up of men who look at it—that way. Though, at a crisis, I admit one finds the general level far higher than one could have believed."

"Yes—there you are! Because, in ordinary times, the little leaven leavens the whole lump; and I believe . . . you are one of those who could 'look at it that way.' Uncle Paul must have thought so; and I'm sure, I'm utterly sure, it would be your salvation if you'd only stop wobbling and stick to it like a man."

Vincent did not answer at once. Both her concern and her conviction moved him to the depths.

"I'd give the world to feel as sure of—anything as you feel of that," he said at last. "I—I shall never forget what you've said; and at least I'm sure of this much, that I can't leave the matter undecided much longer. It's demoralising for a dreamer, like myself, not to be working towards some definite end. So I've put in for early leave, and I mean to go off somewhere into the hills, thrash out the whole thing, and come back with my mind made up one way or the other. There—does that satisfy you?"

She turned her head then and looked him full in the eyes.

"I can't tell—till you come back," she said, hardly above her breath; and at that moment sounds without made them both start to their feet.

"Oh, it's eight o'clock!" cried the girl. "Have we really been talking for two hours?"

As she spoke the door opened to admit Phyllis and a panel of light from the hall. "Why, Thea, all in the dark!" she began; then, seeing Vincent, she wondered whether her absence had again precipitated a climax. "I'm glad you've had good company! I thought I should never get back. But it's going to be splendid. As the Mess trumpet's just sounded, Mr Leigh, I suppose you've decided to stay on for dinner?"

And Vincent supposed he had.

CHAPTER X.

"At her heart love lay
Quickening in darkness."
—ROSSETTI.

THE idea of that lonely pilgrimage in the Himalayas took such hold of Vincent's mind that he accepted it for a genuine inspiration that might prove rich in results. As a vague impulse it had come to him—how significant is the common phrase!—as long ago as last hot weather. Then, on that surprising Christmas Eve, while he sat with Thea Desmond in the firelight, it had flashed from an impulse to a full-fledged decision.

He had the true contemplative's craving for periodical spells of isolation. He knew that at times a man must escape from the entanglement of living to gain the clearer perspective of the hill-top vision; and his most immediate need was for clearer vision and deeper conviction in this matter of his future, which might, just conceivably, involve the future of another. The bare chance, however remote, moved him to wonder and rapture faintly tinged with alarm. For all the strong impulsion of his heart, he still believed himself fundamentally unfit for a relation so close, so weighted with manifold responsibilities. Sternly he applied to his own case Stevenson's arraignment of the average complacent male. "What! You have had one life to manage and have failed so strangely and now can see nothing wiser than to conjoin with it the management of someone else's."

Well—Someone Else would probably deny him any such disastrous opportunity; and for himself, among many uncertainties, one fact stood clear—until he had a definite future to offer her and had gained possession of his own soul, there could be no talk of marriage. The fact that most men would not see it so was quite beside the mark. Though lacking in much that is rightly admired in masculine character, Vincent could not be said to lack the inner vision that purifies motive, yet too often hampers action; and it certainly set him at a disadvantage with a Howard in the field.

Howard saw, in Miss Desmond, simply a beautiful girl whom he intended to win. Vincent, discerning these things through the medium of a less commanding passion, saw in her far more than the mere desire of his heart. Nevertheless, in his own quiet fashion, he proceeded to make the most of a privilege denied to Howard.

His work went more smoothly in Eden's absence. "Old Williams"—though spasmodically violent—gave little trouble so long as he had his port and cigars, his afternoon nap, and his rubber of whist. The Munshi was so completely in abeyance that Thea made mischievous inquiries after his health; while Phyllis kept an interested eye on them, and looked for a climax before the revellers returned from Lahore.

They had not told her yet of Vincent's inspiration. The great secret—at once so exciting and disturbing—was Thea's private property. Womanlike, she demanded details and plans. But Vincent was no maker of plans. Whether from lack of initiative or from the sense of a guiding Hand on the reins, he usually preferred to wait upon events and look for a lead. If his inspiration were genuine, he told her, a lead would come. And, on the last day of the year, it emerged from the post-bag in shape of a letter from a former Munshi at Meerut.

"Bearing in remembrance," he wrote, "the Sahib's frequent conversation concerning holy men and the

Great Search, it came in my mind to send him word of a much-distinguished relative who is lately become Brahma-Samáj, believer in One Supreme, 'the Inward, the Outward, the First and the Last.' Therefore he must leave off many ceremonies held sacred in Hindu households; and there is much outcry among more worldly members of his family. Through their influence and his own talent, he had become Minister of Education in the State of Maidapore. And now, a week ago, he suddenly gave up this high position; that, shutting out contentious voices of Palace and City, he may the better arrive to hear the voice of God in his own soul. Leaving all his many possessions, he has disappeared from knowledge of family and friends as if a stone should be dropped into the sea. To me alone he has written, knowing my long-time inclination for true Brahma worship. I only know that he is gone upon a great wandering to visit many shrines, and talk with holy men of all beliefs. In the summer he will go upon the Northern Pilgrimage to Kedarnath, and I have not forgotten how your Honour often spoke of a wish for some such wandering in the leave season, when other Sahibs care only for shikar. Therefore if you are inclining to visit in Kedarnath with my august relative, your humble servant could doubtless make arrangement accordingly."

Vincent read that letter twice through to convince himself that the thing was actual. Here was a lead; a veritable "call from the seventh Heaven." The prospect stirred in him a feeling of quite unusual excitement. And what would she say—she, for whom worship and action were one? He would show her the letter to-night; but in his heart he knew that, say what she might, he did not intend to forego an opportunity for finding himself, in the deepest sense, that might never be his again.

He had escaped a rowdy old year's night at Mess, by accepting an invitation to dine at the blue bungalow and "see the New Year in" with Thea, Mrs Eden, and Phil, who had pleaded to sit up for that mystical rite,

and was firmly expecting a midnight interview with a cherub in crown and wings.

Vincent, arriving early, found Thea alone in the drawing-room.

"I've got my lead," he said, as they shook hands. "Read that—and tell me what you think."

The touch of repressed excitement in his manner made her glance at him with a half smile before obeying his injunction. "*You* don't seem in two minds about it," she said.

"No. For once in a way, I'm not. But I want your opinion."

He watched her face closely while she read; saw the first gleam of surprise and interest lightly veiled; and when at last she looked up he said boldly: "I believe you *are* in two minds. I want to hear them both—please."

She flushed. "I'm not quite sure—that I can tell them both. Of course it's a chance in a thousand——"

"That's just what I feel——"

"I know you do. I've never seen you so keen. I believe you'd love it beyond words. Only——" her colour deepened. "I'm wondering, wouldn't you . . . love it a little too much? And I'm thinking perhaps Mr Howard's chaff about the Fakir wasn't quite such nonsense after all. But—oh, we can't have you turning Hindu!"

"No fear of that!" he said more lightly than he felt. "The truth is, you're afraid it might turn the scales against the Army."

She nodded.

"That shows you're doubtful yourself if it's my true vocation. Yet you said——"

"I said—salvation," she urged softly. "As for the other, that's not for me to judge." Then rather abruptly she dismissed the subject. "Look here, we simply must tell the darling Phyllis now. She'd be so interested. And I'm sure you mean to go, so why bother any more about my silly two minds? It's a

risk, of course, with you so inclined by nature to shut out 'contentious voices.' But Father believes in bold risks, and I'm sure he wouldn't want me to discourage you. What would you be supposed to be doing all that time?"

"Shooting, of course. I should arrange an address for letters. I'd like part of the time alone. Kashmir, perhaps. But that august relative ought to be worth talking to."

"Yes, indeed," her tone had a faint wistfulness. "I envy you. That's the worst of being a girl. Ah—here comes Phyllis. Won't she open her lovely eyes? She'll back you up more than I do, I believe."

Thea was right. Phyllis welcomed both the idea and a new absorbing topic of conversation the more eagerly that her heart was already overshadowed by a home-coming bound to be stormy in proportion to losses hinted at, though not fully revealed. All through dinner their talk was of the pilgrimage. They discussed Buddhism and Brahminism, within the limits of their knowledge; the doctrine of illusion, the bondage of action, and the Gita's ultimate counsel of perfection—action without attachment. On subjects so impersonal Vincent could talk vigorously and well. Phyllis was brimful of interest; and his mastery of the subject filled her with admiration and surprise.

Only Thea was not quite at her ease. Never had she seen him more nearly enthusiastic. But, in her case, wonder and admiration were tinged with a vague fear that she had no business to feel, and vainly tried to ignore. She recognised here a magnetism stronger than any of which she was mistress; and with that recognition there awoke a fuller consciousness of her own unacknowledged desire for mastery over this man's lonely spirit and heart. She stoutly opposed the bondage of action theory, the purchase of peace by the evasion of conflict and effort; and Vincent, simply for the joy of drawing her out, dropped back into the old Oxford habit of argument for argument's sake. Thea—who cared nothing for abstractions and

everything for the man—stood her ground so hotly that they came near to quarrelling, and at last Phyllis intervened.

"Pax, you foolish children!" she said, pushing back her chair. "Come into the drawing-room and have some music. That's the supreme affirmation that puts argument to shame."

Thea, wielding her fiddle-bow, felt the balance of power pass once more into her own hands: and as if by way of asserting it, she played as Vincent had not heard her play, even at her best.

First, with a touch of defiance, she dashed into a wild Hungarian dance. Then, at Phil's request, came bugle calls and bird songs, picked up from nightingales and thrushes in the garden at Mavins. Then Schubert, and again more Schubert, inimitably gay and tender, and so delicately caressing that she seemed to be drawing music not from mere catgut but from her listeners' heart-strings; an allusion heightened by the fact that the heart-strings of one particular listener were finely attuned to the process.

To-night she seemed possessed with the very spirit of music; and, sure of her audience, she played on and on till Phil fell asleep in his mother's lap and Phyllis followed suit. Then they two sat on near the piano and talked in undertones as they had talked in church on Christmas Eve. There was no more thought of argument. Music had exorcised the fiend; and the mere need for lowered voices gave a sense of deeper significance to things simple and ordinary; so that once again they hovered on the verge of mutual discovery.

For both, midnight came far too soon. Then the sleepers must be roused, the verandah door flung open, and the New Year invited to enter in. Phil, sleepily thrilled and expectant, tiptoed out into the darkness to 'see him come'; but returned crestfallen, to discover that the cherub in crown and wings was merely another pretence of unscrupulous 'grown-ups': and not even two new rupees from Thea and Vincent

could quite atone for the fraudulence of their kind. Tears threatened: and Phyllis hurried him off to bed.

Thea lingered a moment in the hall while Vincent put on his cap and coat.

"I don't seem to think we've had the worst of it this Christmas," she said, "though we have been Cinderellas! And the day after to-morrow they'll all be back again."

"Worse luck!" muttered Vincent, fastening a button.

"That's rather unkind. But I'm afraid it will be —for her; and I'm simply dreading it. If there's been no luck for him, there'll be none for us. But I hope there'll be plenty—for you. Good night. Happy New Year. Don't turn Hindu—if you can help it!"

And with a parting wave of her hand she was gone.

CHAPTER XI.

"Where she is, men will be more than their wont because of her belief."—MERRIMAN.

THEA'S forebodings were justified.

Eden came back with the cloud on his brow and the ominous reticence that spelt heavy losses, temper, and drink. Inevitably the brunt of his disappointment and bitter sense of injury fell upon his wife, who steeled herself to endurance by the recognition that she was merely the whipping-boy of Fate or Luck. When the gods he strove to propitiate tormented him, he instinctively hit out at the nearest object; and that object was most often the woman he loved. And now even the presence of others could not always curb his tongue; but when her own temper or her pride rebelled, she would chastise herself with the reminder that she had become 'the nearest object' of her own free will; and—if only for the sake of her children—she must put up with the result. For all that, being human and inconsistent, there were flashes of conviction, in those first weeks of the New Year, that even for the children's sake she could not very much longer remain and endure.

But if Phyllis received the lion's share of what Thea irreverently called '*fortissimo ad lib.*,' Vincent came in a good second. Nothing that he had done during Eden's absence was right. Even in matters to which he had given special care and attention he was accused of neglect; nor was Eden's humour

improved by the news that in February the Sikhs were to relieve the Pioneers on the Samana Ridge some thirty miles from Kohat.

The injustice of the thing galled Vincent. He did not see why Eden's lack of judgment or of luck should be visited on his head; and he found his own private worries quite sufficiently depressing. For Howard had returned to his wooing of Thea with a tact and persistence that augured well for his success; and to Vincent it seemed that the girl accepted it all as readily as before. Therein lay the real sting. It shook his faith in her sincerity. Had she simply been wiling away the time in Howard's absence? Was she merely—a coquette? God forgive the thought! To doubt the essence of her was intolerable.

For himself, it was one of his many disabilities—arising from a certain fineness of nature—that he could not compete or 'scramble for favours.' He forgot that his lack of initiative and his silence, when he could have spoken, might give quite a wrong impression—as indeed they did: an impression intensified by the renewal of Lisa Williams' strategic attack on himself. Elated by minor successes at Lahore, she was quick to seize her chance of "cutting out Miss Dog-in-the-Manger," who openly encouraged Mr Howard, while "keeping a paw on poor Mr Leigh," lest she fail to land the bigger fish. Such was Lisa's not unnatural view of the case. But she, too, possessed a paw of the feline order; and it was with something of a cat's purposeful stealth that she resumed her interrupted pursuit of Vincent Leigh.

Not that Vincent himself was interested or conceited enough to recognise it as such. He was merely puzzled and irritated at finding himself again involved in accidental meetings and hardly less accidental rides with this ubiquitous young woman. It was more than bewildering to be reminded, in a lilac-scented note, that he had apparently, in a fit of abstraction, asked her to ride with him and quite forgotten the fact. Forgetful, also, of his supposed

incapacity at tennis, he had inadvertently accepted a challenge to single combat with Jerry; and yet another brick was knocked out of the futile wall he had builded in self-defence. His absent-mindedness was, for Lisa, an asset beyond price; and for himself a veritable danger, in that he had no inkling of the goal toward which he was being covertly propelled.

But if Vincent was blind to the significance of these little "accidents," Thea was not. High-spirited, sensitive, and touched by Howard's silent devotion, she had been first puzzled, then piqued, at the apparent ease with which Vincent had been shouldered out of the field; and that he should tacitly accept the overtures of a Mungoose seemed little short of an insult to herself. Though secretly she leaned towards him, her heart was not yet fully awake. She was still in that critical stage of quickened emotional sensibility which heralds the transition from girl to woman, when a slight tilt of the scales may precipitate tragedy or open the gate of paradise. She supposed Mr Leigh had just been taking his Christmas holiday like every one else; and stifling her disappointment, she accepted the companionship that was always ready to hand. On the few occasions that they did meet, her very effort to be natural produced a touch of constraint in her manner that vexed her and deeply discouraged him.

It was not till they began exchanging confidences about Eden that the fictitious barrier showed signs of giving way. In their mutual concern for Phyllis, they could forget to be so acutely aware of each other.

Then, on a certain evening, they went for a ride; and Thea poured forth her indignation, her anxieties, and her vague fears as she could only do to this one man, whose interest was scarcely less than her own. For the last week, she declared, things had been growing worse 'in a kind of silent way' that frightened her more than explosions. Sometimes they hardly spoke to each other all through a meal. Once or twice he

had said things, in front of the servants, that made Phyllis's eyes flash. Even when he was not there she very seldom talked and laughed as she used to do; and Mr Blake was 'bothering round' more than ever.

"They *can't* go on like this much longer," was her final verdict. "It's awful for Phyllis, and it's getting on my nerves. There's a sort of oppression in the air, like a thunderstorm waiting to burst. It makes me feel rather like a bottled-up thunderstorm myself. I wish *I* could burst—over him!"

Vincent's smile had more of tender appreciation than amusement. "Pity you can't! It might clear the air. But honestly, I'm sorry for Eden. Though he's a strong man in some ways, he's like a ship without a rudder, and he must be feeling pretty bad about something inside. Probably affairs are getting serious and he's afraid to own up. It's a typical case of a bear with a sore head.

"I suppose so. But I'm sure the sore head's his own fault. And if it doesn't get better soon, the thunderstorm *will* burst—over someone, as sure as my name's Thea!"

She was right—how right, events proved even sooner than she expected.

The very next afternoon, returning late from a ride with Howard, she found the drawing-room empty, and went straight to Phyllis's room. Gently opening the door, she saw, to her dismay, the lamp on the dressing-table not yet turned up and Phyllis prostrate on the bed, her face hidden in the pillow.

"Who's there? Go away!" that strange Phyllis commanded in a muffled voice.

But there were moments when Thea was incapable of obedience; and this was one.

"Darling, what is it? Do let me come in," she pleaded, standing her ground; and Phyllis, sitting up suddenly, pushed back the ruffled hair from her face with a quick, nervous movement that increased the girl's alarm.

"Don't turn up the light," she said; "I can't stand it. My head's splitting."

But there needed no increase of light for Thea to discern the pallor of her face, the reddened lids, the strained misery in her eyes. With a low sound of dismay the girl flew to her; and standing beside her, gathered her close, pressing the unresponsive head against her breast.

For the moment Phyllis's proud spirit was broken within her; not otherwise would she have suffered even this devoted child to intrude on the bitterness of her grief. All this Thea knew well enough; and the knowledge cut at her heart like a knife.

"You're simply dead-beat after so many bad nights with Phil," she said, the real tragedy being unapproachable. "Do let him sleep with me. Ayah can easily put up the chair-bed and move him out of the dressing-room. As for you, darling, you ought to go to bed at once—and there are those horrid men coming to dinner."

"Yes; five of them," Phyllis assented without attempting to free herself. Speech was a little easier if she could avoid Thea's eyes. "I feel as if facing them all, just now, would be the last straw——"

"Then you *shan't* face them," Thea declared vehemently. "What's the earthly use of me, if I can't manage a wretched little party of six men off my own bat? Oh, angel Phyllis, it's breaking my heart to see you like this! It was bad enough when you were tired and ill. But lately it's been—worse. Hasn't it?"

"Yes. A good deal worse," Phyllis admitted. "And this evening I've had a shock. You mustn't ask questions, child. Only I—I don't know how to meet them all. Not even . . . Ted——"

Her voice was trailing off: her hand fell limply. There had been other fainting fits since that morning of revelation; and Thea, without a word, laid her back on the pillow.

"I'm all right——" Phyllis urged feebly; but Thea was gone. A moment later brandy was at her lips;

warmth was stealing back into her chafed hands. She heard Thea order soup and a poached egg for the Memsahib, who was going to bed at once: and, with a desperate effort, roused herself to protest.

"Thea, you sweet child, it's no good. I must pull through dinner somehow and go to bed when they start the cards. Ted would be furious——"

"Let him be furious then! It's other people's turn now, I think. Oh, Phyllis, do trust me this once. I'll explain beautifully. And I'm not the smallest bit afraid, even if he does explode. I could tackle a dozen of him to-night with all the pleasure in life! You *know*, if Mother was here, she'd do just what I'm doing now."

That last waked a flickering smile. "Of course . . . if she was allowed!"

And Thea's triumph was complete.

"Well, that settles it. Mother's as infallible as the Pope. So don't exhaust your dear self any more. Have a solid night's sleep and to-morrow you'll be fit to tackle things yourself."

The final plea was conclusive. Phyllis knew, as Thea could not, how much there would be to tackle to-morrow; and, with relief unspeakable, she surrendered all along the line.

It was Thea's hour; and she rose to it as the daughter of Honor and Theo Desmond could not fail to rise when the occasion called for courage and championship of another.

Leaving Phyllis half asleep, she changed her dress, listening the while for Eden's arrival, her whole being strung up to concert pitch. He came in late and went straight to his dressing-room; thence to his study. She purposely delayed her own appearance in the drawing-room till the men were almost due; and found him standing on the hearth-rug, an impatient frown on his forehead.

"Where the dickens is Phyllis?" he asked irritably.

Thea drew in a steadying breath. "Phyllis is not at all well. Something—I don't know what—seems

to have upset her. So I persuaded her to go straight to bed and I said I'd tell you why."

His frown deepened to a scowl. "Well, I'm hanged! What's been upsetting her, I'd like to know, that she leaves me in the lurch at the last minute, and doesn't even explain——" He made a move towards the door. "Just receive these fellows, will you, if they come——"

But Thea was there first. Very straight and slender in her simple blue dress, she stood between him and the door.

"Please don't go and disturb her—please! She's fast asleep now; and she was quite bad—really. I had to give her brandy. She *must* be considered sometimes. It would be—simply brutal to wake her up now."

"And I'd be just the man to do it—eh?" he flared out at her. "I won't stand any of your impertinence, Miss Thea. If she's ill, she ought to see a doctor."

"I wish to goodness she would. But I'm afraid a good deal of it isn't the kind of trouble—a doctor could cure."

"You're confoundedly mysterious," he retorted, turning sulkily back to the hearth-rug. "But if she's asleep I'll let her be. She might have stuck it out till after dinner, all the same. Here I've got five fellows coming—not our own fellows either—and no hostess——"

"*I* can be hostess. It's quite simple."

"You! You're a mere baby!" He looked her up and down, his anger tinged with unwilling admiration. Her young dignity and simplicity made him feel something of a boor and he did not enjoy the sensation. "But you've enough self-confidence for half a dozen, I admit."

"Thank you," she said sweetly. "And perhaps after dinner you could go over to the Mess, so as to be sure and not disturb her. She wants sleep more than any medicine."

"Oh Lord, yes! We can swallow our food and make ourselves scarce if that's your ladyship's orders. I seem always to be *de trop* in my own bungalow."

"I wonder whose fault it is . . . if you are," she said, and his blue eyes flamed.

For half a second she flinched before the storm she had deliberately raised; and it was a relief to hear the *kitmutgar's* voice announcing Blake and Captain Allen of the Punjab Cavalry. Well she knew that later on she would have to pay for her bold insinuation; but his sullen air of injury had tempted her beyond endurance: and she was braced for further 'ructions,' almost eager to cross swords with him again.

Blake and Allen were followed by a Major and a Captain of the 51st Punjab Infantry, with a Gunner subaltern; none of whom Thea knew very well. Blake was obviously ill at ease when Eden made his wife's excuses. But she supposed he was merely disappointed, and rejoiced at her own contribution to that end.

Dinner, on the whole, went cheerfully enough: but she was glad when it was over; when, at last, she stood alone in the drawing-room and heard Eden bid his friends to go on to the Mess, where he would join them presently.

"That means I'm in for it!" she thought, and her heart jerked unevenly, like a double knock. But there was no sign of trepidation when he stood confronting her, resentment smouldering in his eyes.

"Look here, young lady," he said, and his voice had the aggressive note that always roused her temper. "It's about time you and I understood each other. I know you think no end of Phyllis and you can't abide me. That's your affair. But if you imagine you can cheek me in my own house you are mightily mistaken. What the deuce did you mean by your last remark? You'll be good enough to apologise or explain yourself before I go."

"I'd much rather explain myself, thank you," she answered boldly, her hazel-grey eyes darkening with anger; and even Eden was struck by the look of her father in them that came out most strongly when she was roused. "I meant exactly what I said; and I

suppose—the cap fits, or you wouldn't be so angry. I didn't intend to cheek you; but it's enough to make *any* one lose their temper to see darling Phyllis ill and tired and worried to death, and you not seeming to care a snap of your fingers; not even seeing—what every one else can see with half an eye. Then when she suddenly collapses, all you think about is yourself and your wretched party——"

He made a forward movement, but she flung out her hand with an imperious gesture; and, in sheer astonishment, he allowed her to go on. "Oh, of course you're furious, and I know I'm saying unspeakable things. But I do believe you're simply blind to it all. So somebody's got to speak out, if Phyllis is to be saved. If you'll only be more decent to her, you can be as angry as you please with me. *I* don't care——"

"The devil you don't!" He did come forward this time, and took her by the shoulders, firmly though not roughly. "Did they never tell you in the nursery that don't care was made to care?"

"No. *We* weren't brought up on stock Nurse's nonsense." The little shiver that ran through her at his touch was of distaste rather than fear; which fact he recognised, and tightened his hold. She was very beautiful in her anger and her young defiance.

"Let me go, please," she said more gently. "You've no right to. I'm out of the nursery now."

"Not very long, judging from your behaviour. You fly into a temper, and flash your beautiful eyes at me like an impertinent spoilt child; and you deserve to be treated accordingly." He scrutinized her face, still holding her; then seeing her appealing mouth quiver, his eyes softened to a smile. "By Jove, it would serve you right if I were to pick you up and kiss you!"

At that the blood flew to her cheeks and she wrenched herself free. "I'm *not* a child, and—you wouldn't dare. It's just a cowardly threat!"

"Dare, indeed!" His short laugh made her angrier than ever. "There's not much I don't dare, Miss

Thea, when any one puts my back up as you have to-night."

"Well, I suppose even when your back *is* up—you are still a *gentleman!*" She flung the word at him—an arrow tipped with scorn. "And a gentleman doesn't insult a girl in his own house."

That last steadied and shamed him. His temper did not flare up again as she had feared it would.

"Insult? Of course not," he said, with an awkward attempt at lightness. "I was only joking, as you'd have known if you weren't such a blessed baby. You deserved a bit of a fright all the same."

"I wasn't frightened. I was simply—disgusted," she answered very quietly; and with a shrug he turned towards the mantelpiece.

"Of course, being a woman, you're bound to have the last word," he said; and she, feeling her mission only half accomplished, sat down in the nearest chair to await developments.

For a few seconds he stood there, leaning an arm on the mantelpiece, his back half turned to her. Then, "Look here, Thea," he said in a changed voice, kicking a fallen log with his foot. "You've been so busy abusing me that you haven't favoured me yet with much information—about Phyllis. What the deuce d'you mean by—'if she's to be saved,' and troubles that doctors can't cure? Did you mean they can't cure her—of me?"

His change of tone, and that tragic question, which came so near the truth, pricked her heart. She saw him for the first time not merely as 'the volcano,' whose eruptions made Phyllis miserable, but as a man with a possible tragedy of his own.

"I didn't mean anything quite so unkind," she said more gently than she had spoken yet. "And it's mostly what I feel and see, not what I know, that makes me frightened about her. And why I said it wasn't what doctors couldn't cure is because she simply wants, more than anything, a long rest; a holiday from *durzies* and worries and—and——"

"And *me*," the man struck in, half angry again. "Have it out. I've noticed a change myself, in this last year, though I am so blind! But she swears it's nothing. That's her way. She's a thoro'bred, is Phyllis. She'll go till she drops. You're not the only one in creation that knows the fine stuff she's made of——"

"Well, if *you* know it too, how *can* you make things harder for her when you must see she's too proud to complain or nag at you, like heaps of women would do. To-night you should have seen how it distressed her not coming in to dinner, simply because it might vex you; though she was so ill and tired she could hardly speak——"

Thea's voice shook a little, and she paused to steady it; but Eden neither spoke nor stirred. She had only a back view now. One foot rested on the fender-stool, and the dejected droop of his shoulders made her feel almost sorry for him. But since he had tacitly given her a free hand, and since he seemed to care, in his own queer fashion, she determined to rouse him thoroughly while courage and opportunity were hers. She longed to speak of the fainting fits, but loyalty forbade. Short of that, she succeeded in presenting a picture of Phyllis, broken in health, unbroken in spirit, that would have moved the heart of a rock; a picture that made the man by the fireplace feel like one who has been walking in his sleep and is suddenly shaken very wide awake.

Decidedly he had been blind—if not worse. The Phyllis he had known in this last year bore little relation to the woman he now beheld through the eyes of another. He had seen her grow more and ever more estranged from himself and his chief hobby, which he regarded—with the ready self-deception of his kind—as a praiseworthy attempt to increase his income for the particular benefit of his family. He had seen her faintly contemptuous of his weaknesses, absorbed in her children and slaving to make impossible ends meet, for their sake entirely, not for his.

Now, in his hour of enlightenment, he saw not only her, but himself, from the standpoint of this amazing Desmond child, who had dared to arraign him under his own roof. And he had the grace to feel ashamed.

What was it she was saying now in that caressing voice of hers?

"I'm afraid Phyllis would be very angry if she knew I was talking like this—sort of pleading her cause. And I can't bear her to be angry with me. But still—I can't be sorry I've spoken. And I don't think you are either. I believe you simply didn't realise. You've been too much taken up with—your own things to notice that she's just wearing herself to death under your very eyes——"

Eden could endure no more. With an upward heave of his shoulders he swung round on her. "My God! Is that true? Don't try to frighten me with childish exaggerations."

"I'm not trying to frighten you." Her soft voice had in it the quiver of tears restrained. "And I hope it is childish exaggeration. But sometimes — I'm frightened myself. Don't tell her I said so, please."

"Rather not. I know Phyllis."

"And please take care not to wake her when you get back from Mess."

"I'll do my best," he said, with a half smile at the motherly injunction; and as he stood there looking down at her, all the ugly lines of temper were smoothed out of his face.

Then he took a step forward, put a hand on her shoulder, and, before she guessed his intent, he had stooped and lightly kissed her hair.

"That's not intended for an insult," he said in a queer, husky voice, and went quickly out of the room.

For a space of time that seemed endless, Thea remained very still and upright—listening.

He had gone straight to the study. Then—there was a long pause. He didn't sound much like going on to the Mess. If he gave it up, she would take it for

a sign that her impertinence and the risk she ran of angering Phyllis had not been altogether vain.

The study door opened. She heard him call the orderly, give him some brief instructions, and shut the door again. She could scarcely believe her senses. It seemed that she had actually achieved something, for the first time in her life. But oh! what would come of it? She had, in effect, put a match to a powder-magazine, and she was consumed with curiosity, impatience, fear, as to the probable result. Supposing it only made things worse? Supposing Phyllis never forgave her——

That thought unnerved her, and leaning forward she hid her face in her hands; but no tears fell through her fingers. She was praying, with the faith and fervour of a child, that good might come of her daring exploit, that Phyllis might understand—and forgive. She felt suddenly very young, very ignorant, and very much alone. A great longing swept through her for the feel of her father's arms, for the sense of security and happiness that he alone could give her. Failing him, she would greatly like to talk things out with Mr Leigh. Meantime, since she could neither write nor read, there was nothing for it but to go to bed—and sleep.

CHAPTER XII.

"Herein lies the magnanimous courage of love, that it endures this knowledge without change."—R. L. S.

It was near midnight before Eden followed her example. During that time, had he been at Mess, he would have signed for a sufficient number of 'drinks' to send him home in the pleasantly bemused state of mind that served, nowadays, as a buffer between his not very exacting conscience and awkward actualities; and he would have tumbled into bed without a thought of restraining his movements lest he disturb his wife.

To-night, though he smoked many pipes, he limited himself to one stiff peg before retiring; and his brain, in consequence, was as uncomfortably clear as his conscience was the reverse. To-night, haunted by Thea's indictment, there could be no escape from actualities: and to do him justice he did not seek to escape them. In his own phrase, he had 'come a cropper' at Lahore, and his money affairs were in a deplorable condition. He had returned fully prepared for an expurgated confession of the truth; but the habit of shirking an unpleasant duty was ingrained in him by years of evasion, and every week the widening gulf seemed more difficult to bridge.

To-morrow he would break down the deadly wall of silence and make a clean breast of it all. He would 'chuck the drink' and do his poor utmost to atone for past failings. It was not in him to realise the immen-

sity of his simple-sounding programme or to detect the ironic note so seldom absent from the tragedies of life. Phyllis was ill and in desperate need of rest from anxiety and strain; and he, by way of reparation, must thrust upon her shoulders a burden heavier than any they had yet been compelled to bear. He saw only the silence broken, understanding re-established, and the Phyllis of old days once again in his arms. His passionate love of her—dulled by estranging influences—had flamed up afresh in response to Thea's eloquence. If only she would be a shade less squeamish and would lavish on himself a tithe of the devotion she spent upon his boy and girl! Well—it was not too late, even now. Once they got round this infernally awkward corner, things would straighten themselves out, he decided, with the easy optimism of his kind; but he did not relish the preliminary process of owning up and trying to make Phyllis understand.

Amused, yet profoundly touched, by Thea's final injunctions, he did not even go into her room that night. Phil's empty bed served his turn. Nor did he venture in next morning till he was dressed for early parade. She was still asleep, or apparently so, and he stood awhile watching her, noting the shadows under her eyes, the strained line of her mouth even in sleep. But she did not stir and he went cautiously out, consoling himself with the thought that nothing much could be said till he could get her to himself for an hour in the study after tiffin.

At breakfast he found no Phyllis. She had been persuaded to have it in bed, and a very friendly Thea presided behind the teapot. But Eden's genuine response was hampered by a feeling of awkwardness not unnatural in the circumstances; and the meal was rather a silent affair. Directly it was over, he went in to see his wife. An uncomfortable sense of unreality oppressed him. If he could touch and hear her he might shake it off; but he found her lying back on her pillows with a languid air, so unnatural in her that things seemed more than ever strange and unreal.

"I'm sorry, Ted," she apologised with a touch of constraint. "Last night *and* this morning! But—it was Thea's doing."

"She never did a better job in her life. Hope you feel rested, old girl?" And taking one of her hands he rather awkwardly leaned down and kissed her cheek.

She received that unwonted demonstration with a half smile but without response.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "I wanted some sleep rather badly. That was all."

"Was it—honour bright? Thea seemed to think something had upset you."

His eyes scanned her face; but she refused to meet them.

"Thea had no business to think. Anyway, we can't talk of that now. What happened last night? You didn't come in at all."

"I slept in the dressing-room, quite comfortably. Thea gave me most particular injunctions not to wake you when I came to bed!"

He tried to speak lightly, to shake off the sense of something unpleasant that hung like a fog in the air, and she looked at him now in utter surprise.

"Thea—gave injunctions? And you obeyed her? What on earth has the silly child been saying?"

"Not much silly about her. She's a good plucked one, even if she does take a confounded lot on herself for a chit of nineteen. She tackled me squarely; and she won, hands down."

"But what did she *say?*" Phyllis insisted with a touch of impatience.

"Quite enough to open my eyes and give me a very bad quarter of an hour. Phyllis, old girl, I've been a proper brute to you; worse than ever since Lahore." He sat down on the edge of the bed and captured one of her thin, restless hands. "But I've had the devil's own time of it myself, if that's any consolation —or excuse. There's a deuce of a lot to tell; and it won't be pleasant hearing. No time now. But we'll

talk it all out this afternoon—shall we?—and start square again."

"Yes—this afternoon," she agreed in a toneless voice. "I have things to say too that won't be pleasant hearing. As for getting square again, that's not so simple as it sounds——"

"Mummy! Mummy!" Phil's voice was promptly followed by Phil's person, as the boy flung the door open and charged into the room. At sight of his father he stood confounded, flushing nervously. "Oh dear, I fort—didn't I ought to have come?"

"Of course you ought, darling," Phyllis said, stretching out her free hand to him; and Eden rose abruptly.

"Not much use making advances," he muttered, "when you behave like an animated iceberg. And the boy's old enough now to knock at your door. Perhaps you'll manage to spare *me* an hour later on."

"Yes, Ted, of course I will." And this time she looked him straight in the eyes: a look so searching, so sad, that his reawakened heart smote him, and he kissed her again.

"I must stay tiffin at Mess. Committee," he said as he went. "But I'll be back soon after three."

He had invented that committee on the spur of the moment. He could not bear to see her again till he could have her to himself and find out what mysterious things she too had to say that would not be pleasant hearing.

In the Mess, after orderly room and kit inspection, his bewilderment was deepened by the behaviour of Blake. Eden had thought him a little odd last night, and this morning his oddness took the form of an apparent desire to avoid his friend.

"No loss to me," was Eden's view of the matter; but his relief was tinged with apprehension. His whole world seemed unstable under his feet. He was thankful to get home again; though here, too, all was uncertainty and disquiet: a state of things intolerable to a comfort-loving man.

No Phyllis in the drawing-room; and he went on into the *dufter*, where he found her awaiting him in the depths of his big chair.

At his entrance she rose, ignoring the gesture that bade her keep her seat, and went over to the mantelpiece.

"Not very late, am I?" he said with a valiant attempt to seem at ease. "Won't you sit down, old girl?"

"No, thank you," she said, and compromised matters by half sitting on the edge of the writing-table, while he faced her in his desk-chair. In the silence that fell, and lasted, her slightly uneven breathing sounded quite loud in her ears.

"Ted," she said at length, forcing herself to speak calmly, "I've stood a good deal in the way of misery and—ignominy in the last two years; and especially in the last few months. I've tried—honestly—to make allowances and put up with things, if only for the children's sake. But I draw the line at—love-making from your friend, Mr Blake."

"Phyllis! That mean little beast?"

"Yes. He *is* a mean little beast." Her eyes flashed momentary scorn. "But — try to look at things honestly, Ted. Is the blame entirely his?"

Eden frowned sharply. "What the deuce do you mean?"

"I mean that no man, not even Mr Blake, would say what he said yesterday to a woman like me, if—if he believed that her husband cared. You remember . . . how you spoke . . . not for the first time, in his hearing——"

He grasped her hand that rested on the table. "It's not *I* that speak so to you, Phyllis. It's some devil inside me——"

"A devil that you don't seem able to control," she said, trying to release her hand. "Either way it degrades us both, and lays me open to — to the intolerable . . . attentions of a man like Mr Blake——"

"Sure you're not exaggerating?" he broke in, and her smile had a touch of weariness.

"Quite sure. It's the simple truth, Ted. I've had to face it, and it's time you did the same. D'you suppose it's pleasant for a proud woman to feel that the whole regiment sees how things are? They do, Ted. I know they do. And yesterday seemed—the limit to what one could endure. After you left—he's not precisely a chivalrous man—but he suddenly flared out. How could I put up with it—and so on. In fact he . . . he openly made love to me. He seemed to think I was bound—to leave you; that I might even prefer——" The blood flamed in her face. "Oh, *why* should I repeat such stuff——?"

"Good God!" Eden exclaimed hoarsely, and with an impulsive movement he flung his arms round her. "No wonder you wouldn't appear at dinner. If he ever comes near this bungalow again——"

Then the truth smote him, and with a groan he leaned his head against her breast. "Oh Lord, I'm in the hell of a hole! And if *you* leave me into the bargain—I'll shoot myself. That's all. My pension would be far more use to you than I am. But then—there are those infernal debts. I was going to tell you . . . I never guessed you'd got this bomb-shell up your sleeve. Phyllis—*are* you going to leave me?"

She could not answer at once. She was struggling with sensations painfully familiar, and with a physical inability to breathe. Sitting above him, she looked down at his head that rested against her and noticed, for the first time, a streak or two of grey in his hair. His passionate outburst and the pressure of his arms brought the past rushing back upon her so vividly that her eyes filled with tears, and freeing one of her hands she laid it on his head.

"No, Ted, I'm not going to leave you," she said quietly—burning her boats. "Last night, I admit—I did think of going home and remaining there. I've managed to save a little this last five years, out of my mother's allowance and yours. It was for sending the

children home; and—I meant to use it now. It's a little more than a thousand rupees."

Eden sighed heavily. "I suppose that *would* be best for the lot of you."

"My dear, there is no question of it—now," she answered, wondering what on earth Thea could have said to transform her man. She had not felt able to speak of it during the morning. "I was only thinking—perhaps the money might help clear your debt to Mr Blake. He—he spoke of it."

At that Eden looked up and the tragedy in his face caught at her heart. "Curse him, he'd take any advantage of a man. I've had a sickener of him lately, I can tell you. And this about finishes things. But he shan't have your poor little savings. And it's a good bit over a thousand, worse luck. Besides, there's no end more. I'm in the devil's own fix and—I've hardly the face to tell you."

"Must you—tell me?" A horrid sense of faintness warned her that she could not stand much more.

"Well, you see—things are getting serious and you ought to know how we stand. But if you're tired, why perch on the table?" He took her gently by the shoulders, put her back into his big chair and kissed her forehead. "Thank God, you'll stick by me, you plucky woman! It's not all just virtue and religion, is it? You do—still care?"

"Yes—I do still care," she said, looking straight into his eyes; and with a silent grip of her shoulders he went back to his seat.

She sat leaning forward, her head on her hand, partly shielding her face from view. Sitting thus, she listened with increasing pain, increasing amazement, to the inglorious tale he had to tell—a tale scarcely palliated by his honest remorse or the convenient delusion that running and backing horses was his practical way of showing concern for his wife and children.

It seemed that he had counted on making 'a big thing' out of Lahore; so that he might give her a

summer in the Hills, or a spell at Home if she preferred. But in every direction the luck had been dead against him. Worse than that, he had a suspicion that Blake, who managed everything, had not altogether played the game.

"He's as 'cute as they make 'em is that little devil," he reiterated with dismal conviction. "Always grabs the lion's share of whatever's going. I've been sick of the partnership since Christmas, but couldn't very well chuck it while I owed him two or three thousand rupees."

Though Phyllis already knew the truth, the full extent of it cut her pride to the quick. And it was not the whole truth. There was more—a good deal more; and Eden seemed determined she should have it all without even the proverbial reservation of his kind. There were debts to shroffs, to tradesmen, and latterly there had been a few accommodations from 'old Williams.' And still the worst was not told. For the last few months he had been in charge of the regimental polo-club money and accounts. These must shortly be handed over to Howard, and —Eden paused a long moment—there was a deficit of about fifteen hundred rupees.

That culminating confession Phyllis received without a sign beyond the sharp indrawing of her lower lip. She just sat there, mute and still, while he floundered through his awkward attempts to justify the unjustifiable.

"I've never touched a penny of regimental money before, I swear I haven't," he declared with a vehemence that struck her as superfluous, since he had done it now. "But I was in a deuce of a fix. Debts of honour, you know. And of course I meant to make it good the minute my pay came in; and I did refund part. But with one thing and another and my deadly run of luck there never seems a damned rupee available these days."

"Your ponies?" she suggested scarcely above her breath, and he threw up his head with the jerk of a trapped animal.

"My ponies are all part owned by Blake. Some of 'em are his altogether. And I'm blest if I give that little cad any further hold over me. No, thank you! But I must hand over the fund to Howard next week, and if the damned thing's not squared by then, I'll be cashiered and the whole apple-cart'll be in the mud. Can you wonder I've been drinking a bit heavily with all this worry on my mind?"

But Phyllis was past wondering, almost past feeling. Again those deadly sensations assailed her, and her heart seemed to be beating all over her body. She felt consciousness slipping away from her; and, while she clung to it desperately, her husband's voice came to her from very far off—a meaningless blur of sound. By a supreme effort of will she half conquered her faintness; and as words emerged again she caught the sound of Theo's name. That startled her back to closer attention; and she realised, with a fresh shock, that he was suggesting an appeal to her cousin —*viâ* Honor or Thea—for a temporary accommodation that would save a fellow-soldier from dishonour——

Her feeble attempt to speak set the blood buzzing in her ears. Mutely she put out a hand to him; swayed—and fell backwards in the chair.

Instantly the man was on his knees beside her, clasping her irresponsive body. "Phyllis!" he cried, and again "Phyllis!" while a nameless fear knocked at his heart. Had he killed her—he who had said last night that she would go till she dropped? That hideous moment of doubt was perhaps the most valuable sensation of his life.

Swiftly he reassured himself, and springing up, hurried across the hall in search of brandy. Here he charged into Thea so violently that he had to catch her arm to save her from falling.

"Captain Eden—what is it?" she asked, breathless and startled. This was a man even more strange than the one she had evoked last night.

"It's Phyllis. She's fainted dead away."

"Oh—again!" The word was out before she could check it, and Eden tightened his hold on her arm.

"What d'you mean by that?" he demanded, hurrying her along with him into the dining-room. ('Rather like the Red Queen and Alice,' was Thea's irrepressible thought.) "Has this sort of thing been going on, while I've been kept in the dark?"

He was fumbling in the sideboard for brandy now, and Thea, torn between loyalty and longing to enlighten him, compromised matters by a half truth. "I have seen her faint—before," she admitted, "and it nearly happened again last night——" Already they were hurrying back to the *dufter*. "She wouldn't let me speak; you know she hates being fussed over."

Eden made no comment on this, for they had reached the study, and between them they succeeded in reviving that death-like figure in the chair. To Thea it was plain, from Eden's manner and Phyllis's pained, startled look when she opened her eyes, that there had been some kind of shock, for which she herself might be half responsible; and the instant her fears were set at rest, she slipped quietly away, leaving the two together.

CHAPTER XIII.

"Soft and loving is her soul,
Swift and lofty soaring;
Mixing with its dove-like dole,
Passionate adoring."
—MEREDITH.

CROSSING the hall, she heard some one canter up, and saw through the chick a man on horseback speaking to Eden's orderly. Her first thought was Howard—and flight. She was not in the mood for him just then. But at the second glance she recognised Vincent, and was out through the chick in a flash. This man might be a tongue-tied incubus at tea-tables, but instinctively she recognized in him an aptitude for the graver crises of life.

"Any chance of a ride?" he asked, lifting his cap.

"Yes. I'll come this very minute," she said eagerly. "How clever of you to turn up just now. If you hadn't, I believe I'd have sent an imperial summons for you!"

"You'd have—sent for me?" Vincent echoed, joy and wonder in his heart.

"Don't be horrified! I only said it on the spur of my relief. Besides—it all depends how you do those things."

And he agreed heartily, remembering the manner of certain lilac-scented notes.

"But I wasn't horrified; I was only half wishing I—I hadn't turned up!"

She laughed and blushed a little. "I call that mean of you! Would you mind—waiting?" She ran down

the steps and standing close to his stirrup spoke in a lower tone. "The thunderstorm's burst! I burst it! Last night. And now—something's happened to make Phyllis faint, and Captain Eden's all to pieces. I don't think they'd care about any one coming in. So please send the orderly for Red Rover. I won't keep you five minutes. Honour bright."

She was as good as her word. In less than ten minutes they were trotting along the Mall, and Vincent's first flush of joy had been sobered by the realisation that, as usual, Mrs Eden was the uppermost thought in her mind.

"Let's go out Hangu way," she said as they reached the turning. "We won't be so likely to meet people, and I've a terrible lot to say."

Vincent asked for nothing better than to listen indefinitely to the music of her voice, apart from the fact that his own interest in what they called the "Eden complication" almost equalled her own. Whether he were needed for himself or no, it was a blessed event simply to be riding thus beside her in the spring sunshine of early February, while she poured out to him, in her vivid fashion—always touched with humour—the story of her high-handed proceedings and their unexpected results. But she said nothing of Eden's kiss on her hair, or of her emotion after he had gone.

"It was simply splendid of you," Vincent declared with frank admiration and surprise. "Even if Army etiquette had allowed it, I could never have done such a thing myself."

"Oh, you could, once you started. You never know what you can do in that line till you begin!"

"But the trouble with me is, I could never have begun."

"You simply couldn't *not* have begun if you'd seen Phyllis—like I saw her before dinner. Still—I did feel rather quivery inside. Sort of strung up: like when you stand on the edge of a boat before you dive. And I'm still a wee bit afraid Phyllis may be angry

with me — if he tells her half I said. Hope he won't! She'd been in there ages before she fainted. I suppose he was pouring out all his complications. But now I've goaded him into speaking, I'm terrified of having only pulled the string of another kind of shower-bath, and perhaps even made things worse. It's Mother that ought to be here. She's got a perfect genius for 'lame dogs,' and these are two of the lamest in creation."

But if Thea looked to Vincent to dispel her fears, she looked in vain. His eyes were grave and he did not answer her at once. He was wondering—seeing how boldly practical was her zeal—whether he ought not to mention certain remarks dropped by Howard and Roddy on the subject of Eden and Blake.

"Oh, what is it now?" she asked, perceiving his hesitation, and he decided to speak. She listened quietly but with a growing dismay, a growing sense of life's overwhelming complexity. She had approached it hitherto with the boldness and gaiety of one who has never come into sharp contact with realities. Now they rose up and defied her, making her feel a thing of infinite littleness and futility; a sensation as new as it was unpleasant. Mr Leigh, in his grave, kind voice seemed simply to be telling her that her small spurt of courage—of which she had felt pardonably proud — was but an insignificant flash in the pan. Blake, it seemed, knew Eden's weaknesses and played upon them to his own advantage.

"Howard and Roddy were talking of it last night," Vincent concluded. "They say he had a bad bout last time he ran up against Blake, a little before his marriage. Then he got home and squared himself somehow. But Howard's afraid he's in a worse way this time—all round. If he doesn't look sharp and pull himself together, it may end in his having to leave the Service."

"Oh, Mr Leigh—he mustn't do that. I believe it would kill her. We've simply *got* to save him — somehow."

Vincent looked doubtful. "*We?* How can we?"

"I don't know. That's the misery. You said, once, that you believed in the power of the individual. But I suppose the individual has to be more than nineteen and three-quarters? Do they mean—he owes a dreadful lot of money?"

"Probably—that and the drinking. If his creditors got restless and started worrying the Colonel there'd be an inquiry; and if he couldn't pay up, he'd have to go."

"And his wife and children would have to starve! Oh dear, oh dear! Don't I *wish* my Two were up here. Mother's the veriest person to square this kind of circle."

The wish was father to an inspiration. She would write the moment she got in—they were lately returned from their tour—and beg one or both of them to find some sort of excuse for a flying visit to Kohat. Then Mr Leigh would see Mother; an event in any one's life! Precisely what they were to do, if they did come, was not very clear. She simply felt certain that in some way their presence would make the rough smooth and the crooked straight: and to Vincent her faith in their omnipotence was an essential part of her charm. Revolt against parental authority and disdain of parental knowledge were not then the matter of course they have since become; but the Nineties—that were nothing if not 'New'—had inevitably produced the New Child and New Parent as a corollary to the New Woman; and a daughter of Thea's type was already rare enough to be something of a phenomenon in an advancing world.

Fired by her inspiration, she was now as eager to reach home as she had lately been to get out; and Vincent may be forgiven if he felt a little left out in the cold. But she would not—he was convinced—have opened her heart thus to any other man in the station; not even to Howard. That was his unfailing solace in moments of dejection: and, as always, he had

his crowning moment when he lifted her out of the saddle.

Released, she flew straight to her room, poured out Phyllis's troubles and her own in a joint letter to the Infallibles, and begged for an answer by wire to their 'distracted and devoted Thea.' Then she dropped the envelope into the post-bag, and ventured in search of Phyllis, comforted exceedingly by the mere casting of her burden on to their shoulders.

Phyllis she found alone in the drawing-room lying on the sofa, neither working nor reading; simply trying to readjust her mind to a new order of things.

"Where have you been, child?" she asked with faint surprise.

"Riding with Mr Leigh," the girl answered, settling herself on the floor near the sofa and resting her cool cheek against Phyllis's hand. "Very wicked of you, darling, to go fainting again. You frightened him out of his wits. I hope, now, he's going to make you see a doctor, at last."

Phyllis shook her head with a tired but very tender smile. "I managed to escape that. But I've promised to swallow a tonic to pacify him."

"*That's* no use!" Thea protested with something less than her usual warmth. "Wait till Mother comes," was the secret thought of her heart.

"Much you know about it, Miss Wisdom! At any rate, it will keep him happy about me." She hesitated a moment; then, putting out her hands, she framed the girl's glowing face and looked into her eyes. "You little witch!" she said softly. "What on earth have you been doing to—my man?"

Those two words—unheard from Phyllis before—were, to Thea, eloquent proof that her little spurt of courage had not been altogether vain.

"Nothing—very much," she answered, reddening at thought of her own impertinence. "I only gave him what they call a piece of my mind!"

"It must have been a very handsome present! Ted

isn't easily impressed. Daring child, you have even more of Theo in you than I thought."

For Thea that was the supreme tribute, as Phyllis knew right well. Since she could not bring herself to thank Theo's daughter in set terms, this was her delicate way of doing it: and Thea understood.

Eden had not told all. Phyllis was not angry: and one of her Two would surely come. Nothing else mattered very much—except, well, perhaps Mr Howard and Mr Leigh mattered a little too. There lurked a suspicion that Mr Leigh might easily matter a good deal more—if he chose. But that was a thought not to be encouraged till he had given clearer proof that she herself mattered a good deal more to him.

Within two days she had her wire from Pindi—"Coming. Writing. Father." And the letter that followed brought news that effectually diverted her mind from Phyllis's affairs to her own. Desmond—having reassured and applauded his 'plucky little girl'—went on to say that they had found the pretext, not a cheerful one, in the same mail-bag as her own letter.

"You know, of course, darling," he wrote, "that for some time we have been anxious about poor old John. We kept hoping the conditions would improve. But the news this week makes Mother feel she ought to be on the spot herself. It may be a long slow business. So she will go home by the first available boat, and will probably stay there for the summer, as I have furlough due in September, when you and I can join her. It's natural enough she should want a sight of you before leaving, and it will hardly surprise Phyllis that Mother would like to see her too. So we've proposed ourselves to Gwen Finlay for a day or two, and will be with you soon after this letter. But don't expect miracles! One can't seem to trespass on other people's private affairs even with the best intentions. Phyllis is very rightly proud and

reserved about such things. But Mother has a way with her that amounts to genius, and whatever can be done, humanly, to avert a possible catastrophe, you may rest assured we will do. As for yourself, whether you will prefer to stay on a little with her, or to come back and keep house for your Twin, is a minor detail we can settle between us when we have pulled off the Great Affair!"

But for Thea, that minor detail momentarily eclipsed every other consideration. It was startling to find that, in the first shock of surprise, she could not honestly tell whether she most keenly wanted to go back with him or stay on here, at least for a time. The thing was incredible; but it was none the less true.

Thea had learnt much since she came to Kohat, and she was now to learn that for every dream fulfilled life exacts a price. Here was her castle-in-the-air—the chance of having her Father all to herself for a few months—suddenly given into her hands; and it hurt her to feel she could not welcome it with the unshadowed delight that would have been hers had it come six months ago.

Did Phyllis mean as much to her as all that? Or was it possible that two strange young men, unknown till a few months ago, could, even for a moment, eclipse her beloved father and his longing to have her? Two of them! She ought to be ashamed of herself. And she was. But shame did not alter the fact that, although she had refused Howard, and dreaded the impending repetition of his offer, his companionship and the knowledge of his hidden devotion gave quite as distinct a flavour to things in general as her own severely repressed interest in Vincent Leigh. Life, without the daily chance of meeting either of them, would not be quite the joyous adventure that it ought to be. But did this mean that one, or both of them, counted for more than her father? Put thus baldly, the question made her feel so angry with herself and them that she thrust it aside and hurried

off in search of Phyllis, to impart her rather mixed news.

Phyllis succeeded in soothing away her vague fears about John. For the rest, she was evidently pleased and far from suspecting any connection with herself. Only one disquieting thought assailed her—the fear lest Theo's presence should tempt Ted to ask for a loan in spite of his promise to herself. Her insistence on this point had brought them near to an open quarrel, within an hour of the fainting fit that had moved him to vow he would forego 'the drink,' except at meals and after polo. It was not in him to fathom the motive of her refusal to accept the simplest and swiftest way out of a hideous dilemma. He saw only that she appeared to set some vague spiritual abstraction above his own concrete and very immediate need. But while power was hers she had made the most of it; and in the end she had prevailed upon him rather to raise another loan—if the thing could be done.

"As for Mr Blake, let him sell all the ponies and pay himself and you out of the proceeds; then wash your hands of him for good," had been her practical solution of that difficulty; and in this matter they were heartily at one. None the less Eden had frankly declared he could not altogether give up racing, that, for him, was the salt of life. He would either keep back a couple of ponies or let these go for the moment and buy two more when this cruel circle had been squared. She had seen that here was need for compromise; and had put new heart into him by giving him proof that the love he had almost extinguished was still a living reality—his, for the asking. She had need to go cautiously at times, and would probably have to do so always: but it was relief unspeakable to know that the crisis was virtually over, thanks to one high-hearted slip of a girl.

The arrival of Sir Theo and Lady Desmond was celebrated by a friendly dinner at the Finlays. In addition to the Edens and Vincent, St John was there with Howard and Maclean. The Skrenes and Mayne

completed the dozen; and the prevailing spirit of informality set every one very much at their ease. All were more or less intimate. Only Honor Desmond was a stranger to some of them. A rather formidable stranger she appeared to Vincent, who had stood in awe of her even afar off. His very admiration of her stately beauty, in its setting of sheeny cream and gold, made him peculiarly inarticulate when the ordeal of introduction was accomplished by Thea; and he could achieve no more than the briefest response to her kindly talk of Wyndham and his mother, in whom she appeared to take a peculiar interest. He was thankful for the approach of Desmond with Howard, whose tongue had never yet been fettered by the beauty of a woman, and whose alert brain was quick to recognise Lady Desmond as a possible ally in the cause he refused to look upon as lost.

By the time dinner was announced the two were on the friendliest terms; while Vincent, surrendered to the father and daughter, had quite recovered his parts of speech. At dinner he found himself, as one of the four odd men, between Phyllis and Mayne; while Howard shared Thea with Eden, and was not a little surprised at the friendly relation that seemed to have sprung up between the two. Aware of Lady Desmond's occasional glances in their direction, he was at pains to monopolize as much of her daughter's attention as Eden would permit. But Thea, elated by her father's presence, was in a mischievous mood; elusive, provocative, and dutifully attentive to her partner, who responded with undisguised appreciation. A faint suspicion of her mother's leaning towards Howard gave her a perverse tilt in the other direction; and she decided that after dinner she would be 'extra nice' to Mr Leigh.

But Kohat, having secured the mother and daughter together, demanded music and more music—Beethoven, Schubert, and reminiscences of Wagner played by ear—to the admiration of all, save a few inveterate bridge-players who had retired to the study. Mere conversa-

tion was at a discount; which fact Vincent, the unconversational, had no cause to regret. Seated well away from the piano, he could surrender himself to the most potent spell on earth; a spell that lifted him almost beyond the plane of personal desire; while the more practical Howard utilized the brief intervals and was very much to the fore. Fired by the friendliness of Lady Desmond, he made small attempt to hide his secret—an open one to any man who had ever been a lover; and Desmond, while devoting himself to Phyllis, was keenly alive to those unwelcome symptoms that could no longer be denied. It consoled him faintly to note that Thea showed small response; and he decided that Honor must not be permitted to make complications for the child by encouraging a man who already possessed assurance enough for three.

To this effect he spoke when at last they were alone in their room, and he sat on a corner of the dressing-table finishing a cigarette, while his wife uncoiled her hair that fell over her shoulders, thick and burnished as ever for all her fifty years. In her husband's eyes, she never looked more beautiful than at this hour of the day. Neither jewels, nor hats, nor any marvels of the dressmaker's art became her like that dull gold wrapper of hers and the bronze-brown mantle of her hair. The few streaks of silver near her temples did but endear it to him the more.

"There's not a shadow of doubt about Thea and Mr Howard," she remarked, with her brush poised for the first downward sweep. "I'm sure he's in earnest; and he looks a fine fellow. A thorough soldier."

Desmond's eyes twinkled. "Then there *can* be nothing against him!" said he, knowing it for her high-water mark of praise. "But Thea's not in love with him, thank Heaven——"

"How d'you know that?"

"How does one know such things?"

"As a rule one doesn't! One jumps at the desired conclusion!"

"Bet you ten to one I'm right," he persisted unruffled. "Anyway, for goodness' sake don't encourage him to worry my Twin. He's just the sort to get at the daughter by making love to the mother. And it's my belief that if the child has a leaning anywhere—which I hope she hasn't—it's towards young Vincent."

"Oh no, Theo. He's impossible. I'd sooner have Mr Howard any day."

"And I'd sooner trust my Thea with Vincent. He has fine qualities and capacities. But he has no surface, so to speak; and he takes some knowing."

"So I should think!" She smiled at the remembrance of her vain attempts to unloose his tongue. "He must be worth something, or you and Paul would not be so fond of him. But—well, he isn't the sort. And you *know* he's not really a soldier at all."

"Which damns him straight away in your ladyship's esteem?"

"As a husband for the daughter of Sir Theo Desmond—yes," she answered, giving a vigorous twist to the thick plait she was weaving. "In any other capacity, he can be as excellent as you please. And I've an idea the Darling shares my particular taste in soldiers. I know we've been fighting over the same one for the last fifteen years or so!"

Desmond laughed and got upon his feet. "Well, anyway, I hope she'll come along home with us and leave both these excellent young men to make other arrangements for themselves. But I've told her she can do as she pleases."

Honor caught his hand and held it close. "Does she ever do anything else where her father is concerned? But look here, beloved, this isn't business. I told Phyllis I'd go over there to-morrow morning; and I hope to get at things sufficiently to be of some use to the poor dear. She's looking rather better than when I saw her last, and Ted seemed in remarkably good spirits. Quite smitten with our impertinent child! I suppose we haven't come on a wild-goose chase after all?"

"I doubt it, from what Vincent said. At the worst, I'm game for a straight talk with Eden. But it would go badly against the grain; and I look to you, Protector of the Poor, to spare me that most unpleasant necessity. Make any promise, any arrangements you please. I'll play up to your lead."

"Bless you! I'll do all I can. Your dear Phyllis is nearly as difficult as you are in such matters. But you can safely trust her to me."

He laid a caressing hand on her hair. "Is there anything on earth I can't safely trust to you?"

"The choice of my own son-in-law, it seems!" she retorted, smiling at his image in the glass. "Now go along and undress."

CHAPTER XIV.

"It is the jewel at my own breast that shines and gives light. I do not know how to hide it."—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

BUT a talk with Phyllis was one thing and getting at the source of her trouble was another. So it came about that Honor Desmond, after half an hour in her drawing-room, felt very little nearer to the end in view. Then, determined not to fail the Twins, she tried speaking quite frankly of the dinner-party incident, and the child's fear of having precipitated a crisis that might only make things worse than before.

"Yes, she did—precipitate a crisis," Phyllis admitted reluctantly, without looking up. "In fact, she saved the situation. Honor—I'm a fool. I can't easily speak of such things, even to you. But it's only right you and Theo should know that Thea—blessed baby that she is—has managed somehow to bring Ted nearer to me than he has been for years. Goodness knows what she said to him. He told me very little. And for me—the result was enough."

Honor leaned forward and laid an arm round the back of her chair.

"My dear, thank you for telling me. Her father will be overjoyed. He has missed her a good deal. But this will atone for all." Then, having achieved so much, she ventured further still. "Thea wrote of two fainting fits very near together. Honestly, dear, you ought *not* to let that matter slide any longer. Do

come down with me, and see Dr Carlton at Lahore. He's first rate."

But Phyllis very decisively shook her head. "You both make too much of it," she said. "Even if—my heart is a little out of gear, there is nothing for it but to try and keep quiet. My poor Ted has quite enough to worry him, at present, without any contributions from me. And where's the use of wasting money on a doctor, who would only prescribe impossibilities? They always do! The Hills, England, specialists——"

"Phyllis, stop! I have an inspiration. Why not come straight Home now—you and the children? It's a Heaven-sent opportunity. Flip ought not to be out much longer, and you can see a really good man who would send you back more fit for this rough-and-tumble Frontier life. *Do* think of it seriously, dear. Theo and I could run to it between us. And I'd love to mother you all through the journey. Honestly I would!"

For quite a perceptible time Phyllis sat silent, tempted beyond measure. Then she deliberately shut the gate of Elysium, and even managed to laugh the matter off. Better still, her laugh rang true.

"Honor, my dear, you're worse than half a dozen doctors! Don't tempt me with fairy-tales—please. We shall probably get our two months in the Gullies. And—just now it would be wicked to desert Ted. I told you how your miracle of a daughter had bewitched him." She paused. The relief of speaking out to this strong, sympathetic woman was gradually undermining her reserve, and leaning forward on her elbows, she spoke in a low, impersonal voice. "Well, one result is, he will give up—several things that have made me very unhappy; and will sell most of his ponies before we go to the Samana. Only—it will be dull there; and, for Ted, dulness is the root of all evil. So you see, he will specially need me with him. I blame myself for a great deal that has happened in the last two years. Again and again where I know I might have helped,—I failed him. I have always

been loyal outwardly. But too often I have been—inwardly critical. And I think one's inner attitude affects a man without his knowing it."

"I am sure of it—very sure," Honor said quietly. A sense of barriers giving way encouraged her to a further venture. "And—his old trouble! Is he any clearer than he was?"

But on that subject Phyllis would vouchsafe nothing beyond a vague admission of bad luck at Lahore, and the remark that a man must face the consequences of his own acts.

"But, Phyllis, when those consequences fall most heavily on others. . . . Oh, my dear, why *should* we beat about the bush any longer, you and I? Theo has heard of serious losses and—well, you know what he is—he's set his heart on straightening matters out. Pocket your pride for once—please. He'll be hurt to the quick if you refuse."

"Oh, I can't—I can't!" There was pain, almost anger, in Phyllis's low tone. "It's too much—even for Theo. And . . . there are complications——"

She broke off and sat silent, wrestling with a new temptation. Ted was pessimistic about his ability to raise that loan and time was short. Fear of his failure and the thought of her children chilled her like the touch of a dead hand. Honor wisely said nothing; but the urgency of her silence could be felt: and suddenly, without looking round, Phyllis put a hand on her knee.

"You know I hate accepting—this sort of thing, on principle. Because you happen to have more, that is no reason on earth why you should pay for other people's—folly and mistakes."

"None whatever!" Honor admitted, smiling at the fundamental oneness of her husband and this proud, hard-pressed cousin of his. "But you know that between you and Theo it is different. You are the nearest thing he has ever had to a sister, and he feels that gives him the right——"

"In a way, I suppose it does," Phyllis sighed.

"Theo is very clever at discovering that sort of right, and there is no one like him in the world! Still, Ted must work out his own salvation, as far as he can. Only—" she paused,—"there's just one liability that really ought to be met now. I can't say any more. If Theo would clear that, I'd bless him for ever. It's about fifteen hundred rupees——"

"We'll say two thousand," Honor interposed, overjoyed at her success, "and you can keep the five hundred yourself, with Theo's blessing!"

"O—oh!" Phyllis leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. "I shall never be able to thank him," she said in a muffled voice.

"What need, dear? Your acceptance is enough. You don't know how happy it will make him."

At that they left it: and fell into more general though hardly less personal talk of marriage and its peculiar difficulties under Indian conditions. Thence they drifted naturally to the eternal Anglo-Indian problem of children and Home. How long one dared—? How far one was justified in sacrificing the man for the sake of his gift? Complex questions that can only be answered by each individual woman according to her own lights.

"And whichever you leave you're pretty sure to regret it," was Honor's philosophic conclusion of the whole matter. "That's all the wisdom I've learnt from twenty-two years of the most blessed marriage woman ever had. I'm rather regretting now having left my poor John. And probably in a few months I shall be regretting having left Theo—though I'm thanking God he has the child.—And now, dear, I want to see *your* children. By the way, I've heard of a girl. I'll show you the letter."

Phyllis rose with alacrity. The shadow of trouble left her face and, by a mutual impulse, the two women kissed without any allusion to the reason that prompted them.

"Theo said he was coming over for a talk with Thea," Honor remarked as they went out. "I sup-

pose the Inseparables have found each other by this time. I wonder where they've got to?"

The Inseparables were at that moment enjoying themselves, after their own fashion, in Thea's room: Desmond sitting in the one arm-chair with his child on his knee, and her head close to his own, while he drew from her those more intimate confidences that somehow wouldn't go on to paper. He heard now, for the first time, of Blake's misdemeanour and Vincent's championship, and a fuller version of her "impertinence" to Eden than any one had heard yet, save the sinner himself. She told him also, in strict confidence, of Mr Leigh's projected pilgrimage—having begged leave of him the night before. Then, hiding her face, she spoke of Howard's proposal, of her own pained surprise that she could hear such a man so plead and fail to respond.

"He says he won't give me up till I'm married to some one else. He says he's going to make me care—some day."

"Well—what's your own opinion, little girl?" Desmond asked, and his arm tightened round her.

"I don't know—I don't *know*," she sighed. "Sometimes—I think he will, and sometimes I think I ought to be downright unkind and tell him I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man in creation. But somehow, when he's there, when he looks at me—I simply can't. Besides—I'm not sure, in my heart, if it would be true. It's too stupid of me. I never thought I could be so wobbly. But the—the feeling comes and goes in the queerest way. You see I—I rather like him to be fond of me, if only he didn't want to . . . take me away from you. There's heaps of time for getting married later on."

"Hear, hear!" Desmond spoke lightly, but again he tightened his hold. "After all, if Howard's in earnest, he can prove it by waiting." Then he gently put her from him, the better to look into her face. "There's no one else, is there?"

"No—I—not in that way," she answered, blushing

a little and avoiding his eyes. "There's only—my other friend, Mr Leigh. I don't know what I should have done without him in all this Phyllis complication. But he's not like Mr Howard. I believe he could be quite fond of a girl without a thought of—marrying her. And anyway he seems to be—appropriated. So you ought to be quite satisfied about him!"

But Desmond was perverse enough to be very far from satisfied. His suspicion of the night before increased almost to a certainty, while he listened to her broken phrases and watched the colour deepen in her cheeks. Unless he was very much mistaken, she was telling him, in effect, that Paul's silent, aloof, yet very individual stepson had unwittingly stolen a jewel for which he seemed to have no use: and the mere possibility that she had given—or half given—her heart away prematurely disturbed and angered him far more than any application for her hand.

His silence puzzled her. "Aren't you satisfied, you best of all Dads?" she asked him, smiling.

"Yes—if you are." And as she merely leaned against him with a crooning sound, he added: "Who is it that's appropriating young Vincent? He doesn't strike one as a likely subject."

She shook her head without lifting it.

"No . . . he doesn't. Only . . . he's sort of colour-blind about some things. And that Mungoose girl . . . she's more like a leech! I'm sure he doesn't care an atom; but——"

"But you're afraid it will be a case of 'when I led dear Vincent to the altar'—eh?"

Desmond spoke with deliberate lightness: and she, falling headlong into the trap, sat bolt upright, her cheeks on fire. "*I* can't see anything to joke about! I'm sure she's quite capable of proposing to him. And I don't believe he wants to marry—at all. But he's so . . . so chivalrous and so shy: he wouldn't know how to get out of it; and . . . oh, think of Uncle Paul and his mother! I call it a tragedy; not a joke."

"Aren't you going ahead rather rapidly, little girl?"

Desmond said very tenderly; but a spark of anger flamed in his heart. "Is my Twin so very much her mother's daughter, that she wants to play Providence to Vincent as well as to Phyllis?"

At that she hid her face again. "Don't make fun of it, darling," she pleaded. "I can't. How can I? That's the nuisance of being a girl."

"As a matter of fact no one can, child, if that's any consolation to you. Personally I have enough faith in Vincent to feel sure he can hold his own against your Mungoose without any assistance from us."

"Well, I hope so," she murmured doubtfully: and it struck Desmond that here was the acceptable moment for his test question.

"Thea," he said, pressing her head against his shoulder, "are you coming back home to look after your Twin, or would life at Pindi seem too deadly dull without your very particular young men? Of course, if you would sooner stay a bit longer with Phyllis, I shall be all right. Captain Markham can be trusted to emulate Mother in seeing that I don't choke over a fish-bone or get drowned in my shaving water! I have removed the obnoxious Colonel; so the coast is clear. But——"

"But! Have you the face to pretend you're doubting what my answer will be?" she demanded with shining eyes.

"I don't know about pretence! But I do know that you seem to have struck down pretty deep roots here one way and another."

"Yes, that's true: the children; Phyllis; and all this trouble of hers. Though it's only four months, I somehow feel ages older than that other Thea, who came up from Pindi in October. I suppose Mother would approve. She always said I was such a baby for my age."

"M'yes. Personally, I wouldn't have it otherwise—yet awhile. I'm selfish enough to want to keep my *child* as long as nature and impatient young men will allow."

"Well, you're still holding her tight enough, anyway!"

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright!" she echoed, and lightly kissed his cheek.

"Does that mean you're coming away with me the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes." The merest shadow of hesitation lurked in her tone. "I—it'll be easier leaving them all if I actually go with you two. And things won't be so hard for Phyllis—now. Sometimes, just lately, I've felt almost in the way."

"Well played indeed," Desmond said gravely, enclosing her two hands in his own. "As for me—well, *you* know right enough whether I'll be glad to get you back!"

So the matter was settled between them to Desmond's shameless relief: and Thea said no word of her secret longing to see Phyllis through the move into her new quarters, and to experience the thrill of living in a 'real live fort' if only for a week or two. It was her first reservation of the kind: and it certainly would not have been made by 'that other Thea who came up from Pindi in October.'

CHAPTER XV.

"And I—I knew full well he was my lad;
And he—he surely knew I was that woman.
But yet—
We both were silent."

—*Bard of the Dimbowitza.*

THAT night the Desmonds dined at the blue bungalow; and Phyllis manœuvred a few moments alone with Theo, who must be thanked in some measure, whether he liked it or not. Then, when all was over and the coast clear, she lured her husband into the study, and there told him the news that even now she could hardly bring herself to believe.

If acceptance had been a hard matter, Eden's amazement and gratification were more than sufficient reward. They were sitting as they had sat on the day after Thea's thunderstorm; he in his desk chair, she on the edge of the table facing him.

"But, good Lord," he repeated, still half incredulous, "you made me promise—I thought nothing would induce you——"

She explained as best she could the nature of Honor's inducements, and incidentally emphasised the difference between asking for a temporary loan with no visible guarantee of repayment, and accepting a spontaneous gift.

Eden admitted the difference; but in such matters they never could, probably never would, see eye to eye; and the next moment he almost inevitably struck a wrong note.

"The General's a thundering good chap, I must say. All the same, old girl"—he hesitated a moment—"if you could bring yourself to accept so much, another thousand would have made precious little difference to them, and would have gone half way to getting me clear of Blake——"

"Ted, how *can* you!" she broke in impatiently. "If you talk like that you'll spoil everything. It was only fear of the open disgrace that made me feel I daren't refuse what I could never have asked. And you *must* stand up to the rest of it. Have either of you done anything yet about selling your racers?"

"Yes—'m no. I'm not sure what he's done. I gave him such a hell of a rating the other day that we've hardly been on speaking terms since. Of course he flung the loan in my teeth, curse him! And I told him straight he could go to the devil and take his blasted money with him; or in other words, he could sell the gees and pay himself out of the proceeds. That's as far as we've got."

"Couldn't you advertise them yourself, too?"

"Yes—I could." He frowned into vacancy, and chewed the end of his pen. "You don't know what it means—parting with 'em."

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead. "Ted, I've done all I could."

"And a long sight more than I deserve," he admitted gruffly. "You didn't let on to Lady Desmond?"

"My dear! I'd have died sooner."

He pulled her forward and kissed her passionately. "Phyll, you're an out and out brick. Before God, I'll play square and do my best to make up for things. But how the deuce am I to thank Sir Theo?"

"I've done all that. It's a present to me. You can write afterwards, if you like. Did Thea tell you she's going back with them?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. Wish she could have seen you through this move. Rather nice, though, being by ourselves again?"

She smiled and let her hand fall lightly on his, that was scratching hieroglyphics on the blotter to the detriment of his pen.

"All the same," he went on, "she's a ripping little girl. If she hadn't had the pluck to let fly at me, I'd have been near shooting myself by this time."

"Ted, don't talk of it! We owe her a good deal more than two thousand rupees, bless her! Come along. I'm sleepy."

The 'ripping little girl'—who still lay awake, with the foretaste of more than one parting tugging at her heart—heard them pass out of the study and through the hall; heard Eden's chuckling laugh at some remark of his wife's, and tried to salve her own secret ache with the conviction that she had, in her own small way, proved the power of the individual, and that Phyllis really did not need her any more.

Somehow that thought was not quite so consoling as it ought to have been. There were tantalizing visions, also, of that long low fort on the Samana ridge overlooking the rugged, lawless Afridi country. She knew now how keenly she had been looking forward to it all; and a lurking suspicion that neither Phyllis nor the children were entirely responsible for her disappointment, made her feel quite unreasonably annoyed with Mr Leigh. He had earned no right of admittance into the sanctuary of her private feelings, and had no business to spoil her joy in going home to keep house for her Twin. Upon which conclusion she sternly dismissed him from her thoughts.

Morning brought a desperate note from Howard. The news of her immediate departure had come upon him "like a thunderclap." She *must* know what it would mean for him; and she must spare him an hour for a ride that afternoon. She need not be afraid he would pester her for a decision; and in any case he was hers ever, Lynn Howard.

She had expected something of the sort, and hoped

that something or—some one would offer a pretext for escape. Not that Howard's company was ever unwelcome, but that she was growing a little afraid of him. Always, when they were alone together, she was aware of a quietly persistent undermining process very difficult to withstand. But at such a moment she had not the heart to refuse; and Howard's *sais* returned with a note of acceptance that naturally added fuel to the flame of his hope.

Later, a good deal later, came a few lines in Vincent Leigh's cultivated handwriting.

"You never gave me to understand that your master-stroke involved the possibility of this! So I suppose it is an unexpected development. You will be glad, of course. But you can't expect those who are left behind to share that feeling. Is there any time to-day when I could see you—properly, I mean—to say Good-bye, since it has to be said? No chance of a ride, I suppose?—Yours very sincerely,

"VINCENT LEIGH."

She read the note twice through with a little pang of disappointment, almost of irritation. If he really wanted the ride, why hadn't he written sooner? As it was, she could only say that Mr Howard had already asked her to ride; but it would be nice to see him, if he cared to look in before Mess. It was guest night and her father was dining, or she might have persuaded Phyllis to ask the undeserving one to dinner. Howard's note had been torn up; but she pocketed this one, and resolutely set about her packing. In less than half an hour she took it out again, read it a third time; stood very still, as if hesitating—then deliberately tore it up and dropped the shreds into the fire.

When her Two appeared at tiffin, she announced her programme with studied casualness, and tried not to be aware of her mother's smile. Her father's direct glance there was no evading.

"You seem to have let yourself in for it, little girl," he said afterwards when they had a moment alone.

"Oh no, I don't think so," she answered, laughing.

"Well, don't go making any pie-crust promises —that's all. I'm going round to look at Vincent's ethnological notes and have a talk about things in general."

"Say you'll wash your hands of him if he leaves the Army. He'd mind that more than anything, I do believe."

"Would he? Well, I'll do what I can. But he's a difficult, uncommon sort of boy, and he must work out his own salvation along his own lines."

"You *are* a wise Dad! Wish I could come too. But I promise not to promise! Is that all right?"

"I devoutly hope so," he said: but it was with a twinge of anxiety that he left her and strolled round to see Vincent, whose future—always an interesting speculation—had suddenly become for him a matter of acute personal concern.

He found the notes and rough draft of an article on Some Border Legends more promising than he had expected; and, with the stimulant of a little judicious praise, he succeeded in making Vincent talk as he could only do when a favourite subject was his theme. His pertinent questions and occasional clear-cut expressions of opinion suggested a mind not merely studious but capable of individual thought.

"Might do well in the 'Political,'" Desmond reflected more than once. But Thea's desire was for the Army, and his own faith in it was set upon a rock. So he listened, with increasing approval, and led the talk towards the pilgrimage that, it seemed, was to decide Vincent's fate—possibly some one else's too.

He refrained from pressing his original invitation to Murree. Until this queer boy had found himself, the less Thea saw of him the better.

"Have you made any progress with that pilgrim-

age plan of yours?" he asked. "Can it really be arranged?"

"I believe so, sir. The ex-Minister, Sir Thakur Das, has taken quite kindly to the idea. He seems a very cultivated man. And I like the tone of his letter to my Munshi friend. Would you care to read it?"

"Very much indeed."

Vincent, shifting his papers in search of the letter felt Sir Theo's gaze fixed intently on his face. He had been aware throughout their talk of a keener interest underlying the General's natural kindliness, which set him wondering. "What would he think if he knew?"

"Here it is," he said aloud, and he in turn surreptitiously watched the older man's face while he read.

The letter was a longish one, simple yet fervent; lighted here and there with flashes of eloquence straight from the heart. Desmond decided that the writer had individuality; that he was no mere curious dabbler in things not seen like too many of his kind; and these very conclusions set an anxious crease between his brows.

"You seem to have struck a good specimen of a very mixed type," he remarked, removing his nippers and handing back the two close-written sheets. "And I suppose you realise that this sort of thing taken in large doses is likely to make a deep impression on a mind like yours?"

"Yes, sir; I realise that. I think it makes me—all the more keen."

Desmond frankly scrutinized the supposed victim of Lisa Williams. "You're getting on for four-and-twenty," he said. "Yet I gather that you're still, so to speak, taking stock of the universe and its Maker and reserving your judgment?"

"Something of the sort, sir," Vincent admitted, drawing circles on half a sheet of paper. "Is it a dreadful confession?"

Desmond smiled. "In some respects it's a very promising one; so long as you do cast anchor eventually—and not too eventually. I know you candidates for truth disapprove of anchors on principle; but I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that a man needs some sort of stable foundation to build his life upon. A definite faith is not quite incompatible with an open mind; though the folk who swear by drifting like to think so. Don't drift, Vincent, any longer than you can help."

"I don't want to, sir," the boy answered with none of his usual indecision. "That's why I'm keen about this expedition." He hesitated. "I—I'm glad you approve, sir. It's a pity—Miss Desmond doesn't."

"Doesn't she, indeed!" Miss Desmond's father regarded him so straightly that his interest reverted to the half sheet of paper. "She's a very decided young woman. Are you coming round to say good-bye to her?"

"Yes. She said I might."

"Come along then. We'll go back together."

And as they went, Desmond was aware that he had come no nearer to divining the true state of Vincent's heart. On the whole, he was more than ever glad that his child had chosen the way of separation from this doubtfully potential lover, since it seemed the way most likely to ensure her ultimate happiness.

As they turned into the blue gate-posts, they caught sight of Howard and Thea at the far end of the Mall. Their ponies were closer than the occasion demanded, and Howard leaned towards the girl, whose interest seemed concentrated on Red Rover's mane.

"H'm. There they are," muttered Desmond, and Vincent's glance toward them was of the briefest. But the same question flashed through the minds of both: "Has it come at last?"

As a matter of fact, their anxiety was groundless. Howard's conduct, in spite of sharp temptation, had been exemplary; and by way of reward he had the tantalizing vision of a Thea unmistakably softened

by his restraint. At the moment when Desmond sighted them, he was reiterating his determination to spend half his leave in Murree whether there were any hope for him or no.

"In the meantime I shall write," he added, with his eyes on the peach bloom of her cheek. "I shall write often, whether you read my letters—or burn them."

"Why should I burn them? I'm not a heartless beast," she said reproachfully. "And I like getting letters from my friends."

"Even when you don't care a button for the writer?"

At that, she lifted her eyes to his. "I think you're ungrateful and unfair."

"Does that mean you do care . . . a little, now?"

He saw her lower lip drawn in. "I care . . . a lot," she answered, looking straight between her pony's ears and noticing in particular detail the network of wheel-marks on the dusty Mall. "Only not . . . in the way you want."

"As to that," the man broke out with smothered passion, "I'm desperate enough—almost—to accept any kind of caring, so long as I get you. But I've still a few grains of sense left, and they warn me that I shouldn't be satisfied with half measures. So I can only pray for your conversion."

"D'you ever really . . . pray?" she asked simply; and for the moment he was nonplussed. But he liked her the better for that direct question, and had the moral courage to answer it truthfully.

"Not often, these days. But I suppose even the worst of us revert to the old habit when we're up against a big thing—as I am now. I'm afraid, though, it's more often from instinct than from any active faith in the result."

Suddenly remembering her talk with Vincent, she asked: "Isn't it perhaps—that you need to think things out more?"

"No. I'm not that kind. Never was. Besides,

there's such a deuce of a lot to do. A fellow has no time for hair-splitting about the Invisible and keeping a regiment up to the mark as well. Seems to me, if a man just does his best all round, it must give him a fighting chance at the Great Assizes. Oh Lord, here we are! And we've wasted our last minutes talking mere abstractions."

"Rather important abstractions!" she said, smiling at his characteristic regret.

Howard's answer—necessarily unspoken—was a very concrete oath. For Desmond stood awaiting them in the verandah; and he saw himself defrauded of certain unforgettable things he had meant to say at parting. Worse still, as they drew rein Sir Theo came down the steps and lifted his daughter out of the saddle.

"Had a pleasant ride?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks, sir," Howard answered, raging inwardly: and without dismounting he reached out a hand to the girl. "Good-bye, Miss Desmond. We'll give you a real send-off to-morrow," he said; adding boldly, "And after that—Murree."

Then he rode away at a brisk trot, wondering very much whether his restraint had appreciably advanced his cause with the most enchanting girl on earth, and feeling not a little sore with the General for what he deemed a superfluous assertion of ownership. He stigmatised fathers in general as 'a selfish lot,' wilfully blind to the fact that the true destination of their daughters was the arms of younger men.

Meantime that selfish father, on entering the hall, had looked so deep into the eyes of his little girl that signals of distress flew to her cheeks. Then, without a word, he kissed her and turned towards the study.

"I've got to see Eden for a few minutes," he said. "You'll find Vincent in the drawing-room. No end to these young men!"

Vincent's greeting was the more awkward because of a troubled consciousness that she was probably comparing him with Howard to his inevitable disadvan-

tage. For once, his awkwardness affected Thea, whose emotions were in a very complicated and unruly condition.

"You didn't expect—this, did you?" he asked, scanning her face and wondering 'Has she accepted him?'

"No. Not till I got Father's letter. Then I knew—it might have to be."

"You never said anything, even then."

"Because—oh, he left it to me," she answered, avoiding his eyes. "And just at first . . . I couldn't quite decide. Are you amazed at that—after all I've said?"

"Well, I shouldn't have thought it," he admitted, not without a pang.

"No more should I. And I'm horribly ashamed now it's over. I didn't mean to tell any one. But you're rather uncanny the way you—make me tell things."

"I—I wasn't aware," he apologised, absurdly elated. Her words almost atoned for his belief that her indecision concerned Howard, and Howard alone.

"Of course not," she said, pensively twisting the tassel of her riding-whip. Then she fell silent; and Vincent could think of nothing to say because the one impossibility had become suddenly urgent within him, and because every second wasted was like a grain of gold-dust slipping between his clumsy fingers.

"I would dearly have liked a few weeks in the fort," Thea said suddenly. She guessed he was thinking of Howard, and was annoyed that her honest explanation had failed to sound genuine.

Vincent rather audibly cleared his throat. "Perhaps—we may still get you there one of these days. It will be rather lonely for Mrs Eden."

"Not quite so lonely, since the thunderstorm! But I'd love to come any time that Father can spare me."

Again that fatal silence quick with things inexpressible; and Thea, vexed with herself, vented her im-

patience on him. What did he come and see her for, if he had nothing to say?

And, as though trying to answer her thoughts, he remarked with a too obvious effort: "Sir Theo's been so encouraging. He approves of the pilgrimation."

It was a happy theme. It put her more at ease. "I told you he would. He believes in risks. But he wouldn't approve of the Hindu result—any more than I should! And—shall you send us news, now and then, how you progress?"

He brightened visibly. "Of course I will—if you care to hear."

"Well, naturally we would. But I suppose—*you* won't have a findable address any more than a swallow has?"

"Not quite as bad as that! The wandering officer must always have a string round his leg. I shall have to arrange one or two places where letters can accumulate against my arrival. And after an overdose of my own society they will probably be such a treat as they never were before."

"Then we'll certainly write and tell you all about the other folk who aren't scouring the mountains in search of truth with a capital T!"

"I believe in your heart you're just a little scornful of the whole thing," he said, wondering why she clung to the first person plural.

"I'm not, I'm *not!* I'm only . . . just a little anxious, as I told you from the first."

To that moving confession he could find no answer. Another awkward silence threatened; and Desmond's reappearance was hailed, by both of them, almost with relief, though it heralded the beginning of the end.

Desmond, himself, kept a surreptitious eye upon their parting; but could detect nothing beyond an overlong hand-clasp and a slightly warmer tint in Thea's cheek as she said, in her softest voice, "Good luck to the pilgrim! And I'm never scornful. Please remember that."

"I will," he said with a sudden direct look: and then—he was gone.

"You'll miss those two," her father remarked, drawing her close, as if to assure himself that he had her safe in spite of them.

She nodded, and her cheeks grew warmer still. Then, impulsively, she flung her arms round him and clung to him with never a word.

The 'real send-off' next day was followed by an aching sense of emptiness in two hearts, at least, out of ten or a dozen that grieved to see her go; and to those two it inevitably recalled her earlier departure—with a difference. Then it had been a matter of weeks. Now it was a matter of months: for Howard, some three months, with the Great Possibility gleaming like a planet on the horizon. For Vincent—left very much alone with his doubts, his discoveries, and his dreams—the blank was indefinite as the rest of his hazy future. Enough that he had achieved one decision; namely, to postpone all other decisions till he could recapture his old detached attitude towards men and things: always supposing he had not mislaid it for good—which still remained to be seen.

PHASE IV.

EARTH'S WHEEL

CHAPTER I.

"Oh Mother Earth, Father Sky,
Brother Wind, Friend Light,
Sweetheart Water . . .
To-day I am melting away into the Supreme
Because my heart became pure,
And all delusion vanished
Thro' the power of your good company."

—*Bengali Poem.*

THE fires of sunset were slowly burning out in the west. From the first blaze of amber, through orange to crimson and shell-pink, a crescendo of colour had flamed to the zenith of heaven and rosily tinged the spaces of eternal snow that filled the greater part of the horizon, blocking the northward view. Now, by impalpable degrees, pinks were merging into tenderest greys; and there, in the fading light—near a cluster of huts, perched perilously above unimaginable depths—sat Vincent Leigh. Still as the vast stillness above and around him, he sat on entranced; his seat a flat rock, his shoulders resting against the wall of his own particular log-hut, where he would spend as much of that night as his coolies would permit before pushing on over the Pir Panjál Pass into the valley of Kashmir.

It was difficult to believe that only five days ago this majestic assembly of mountains had flashed along the misty blue horizon like the vision of a dream: a vision that promised divine atonement for those first shadeless marches along the Road of the Emperors whereby he had chosen to make his entry into Kashmir; thus deliberately avoiding Murree—and all that Murree involved. Though his rebel heart might ache for the

passing consolation, his will held firm. First the Great Experiment; then the dimly possible reward. If, after a month of Howard on leave, there were still no engagement, he might begin to hope—to believe——

Meanwhile he had written three or four times since that unsatisfactory parting in February. Finding his pen readier than his tongue, he had written at some length; and she had always answered him punctually, also at some length—letters as breezy and spontaneous as her talk. In this way they had arrived at an acknowledged friendship with which Vincent tried to believe himself content.

He had spent March and April with his company at Hangu, an important post at the foot of the Samana ridge, where half the regiment garrisoned a couple of forts and five picquet posts for protection of the road. For Vincent the isolation and monotony were counterbalanced by the fact that there he was practically his own master, immune from Miss Williams' assiduity and free to make time for reading and study. Into the rather colourless round of life at Hangu, letters from Thea Desmond had fallen at intervals like dew on the desert; till May the 1st sounded the hour of his release. The joy of it was incredible. For nine limitless weeks he could call soul and body his own. His plans had been engineered without a hitch, and with just enough of elasticity to suit his vagrant mood. By the Pir Panjál route he would reach Kashmir in eight or ten days, and thence strike out across the Himalayas toward Simla, and so on to Kedarnath—a shrine of peculiar sanctity on the Upper Ganges. His original hope had been to ride or tramp the whole distance, keeping entirely to the mountains, but restrictions of time forbade. From Simla, therefore, he must make a brief plunge into the furnace of the plains and travel prosaically by rail to Hardwar. Here he was to join Sir Thakur Das, C.S.I., whose letters promised interesting developments at close quarters. Meantime, he had for company the ever-

lasting hills, and his free spirit was attuned to imbibe greater things from their strange, wild spaces and glittering silence than from the lips of wisdom incarnate.

His choice of a route had been characteristic. More widely read in Indian history than his fellows of many years' standing, he had set his heart on entering Kashmir by the ancient imperial highway of Akbar, Jehangir, and Aurungzebe. Starting from Gujerat, and marching by the golden remnant of a half-worn moon, he had eluded the worst of the heat, till the plains swelled gently into the foot-hills and cactus gave place to pine. From the verandah of an airy bungalow, set upon a cliff, he had his first vision of India's mighty snow-line—a vision he would not forget while he lived; and towards evening he had wandered in a waking dream through the ruined courts and arches of the Moghul Serai, where the dying Jehangir halted, on his downward journey from Kashmir, and looked his last on the snow-peaks he loved. Of all the great Emperors was none more gifted, more original than Jehangir—artist, soldier, and sportsman, slave of the wine-cup, and finally its victim. Yet when he lay dying and his attendants asked was there anything he craved, he answered them—"Only Kashmir."

Vincent had read and delighted in the Memoirs before ever he set foot in India; and for him it was spirits of Jehangir and his Light of the World that had haunted this ghost of an imperial highway, with its sleepy, mediæval towns, its pervading aroma of splendours dead and gone. But to-night, seated on that boulder overhanging infinity, with the sheltering forests far below him, he had a sense of having climbed beyond the grandeur and pathos of things human to the threshold of things divine. The wind from the snows, blowing into the recesses of his spirit, seemed, in its unearthly purity, the very breath of God. Even the man's heart that ached within him was stilled by the influence of that fair white silence,

as a restless child is stilled by the touch of its mother's hand. For now the last flush of life had faded from the snows, and over the western peaks the white fire of Jupiter shone clear as a candle on a windless night. And still Vincent sat on, lost in that deep and direct union with the essence of things that transcends conscious thought as love transcends passion. For the moment Vincent Leigh —the imperfect lover, the studious, yet secretly adventurous, subaltern—was one with the mountains, the oncoming night, and the ghostly tremor of newborn stars—

A penetrating wind and discreet coughings from Nur Bux, man-of-all-work, jerked him down from the stars to the smoky twilight of his hut, where a tin of army rations and fresh-made chupattis awaited his honourable attention; and soon after eight he was between his blankets, sleeping too soundly for dreams.

The baggage coolies—obsessed by dread of mountain storms—insisted on rousing him at half-past three of an unclouded May morning; and from the stuffy stable atmosphere of a goat-herd's hut he stepped out into a world that, like himself, was only half awake. Black darkness still in the depths, violet darkness in the starry zenith, paling to a misty toneless blue where the Great Ones loomed majestic awaiting the dawn. Peaks, rugged and arrowy, domes and shining ledges, seemed to emit an unearthly radiance, streaked and splashed with immense brush-strokes of shadow. And in the midst of it all a dozen odoriferous coolies were squabbling over their loads.

Vincent was thankful to see the last of them, sternly shepherded by Nur Bux, and to set out himself on the march that would take him, at last, over the mountain barrier into Kashmir. His sole companion, besides Nur Bux, was a Dogra orderly, from Jerry's company, chosen as much for his abnormal gift of silence as for his familiarity with the Himalayan paths and cattle-tracks, the footways of ancient India's commerce and ideas.

The Pir Panjál, though a minor pass, is quite sufficiently stiff for a beginner. But the glory that was revealed when the moon grew pale and the East flushed and a host of Shining Ones stepped quietly out of the night, was worth five times the fatigue of the last three thousand feet and intermittent rushes across treacherous slopes that culminated in a white winding plain, watched over by white hills—the Pass, at last.

By now the ghostly serenity of the snows had given place to a more living brilliance, as peak after peak flushed and glittered—and the miracle of resurrection was complete. Splashes of shadow were grey no longer, but blue and bluer as the sun reasserted his dominion over an awakened earth. And there swept through Vincent a great longing to set up his tabernacle in this enchanted region of sun and snow and keen invigorating air that made every fibre of body and brain feel electrically alive. Here, eleven thousand feet above the swarming, fretful cities of the plain; here, where multiplicity and complexity were resolved into dazzling unity, a man's heart could not long be 'scorched with the heat of having' and the feverish pursuit of the unattainable must speedily die a natural death. He ignored, in his uplifted mood, the taint of the higher egotism—forgot that the heights are given to men for worship and inspiration, not for a permanent dwelling.

But relentless coolies discouraged any impulse to linger in that sanctuary of peace. For them the Pir was a treacherous deity, not to be trifled with, lest he turn and rend them; nor could the most eloquent argue the point with distant, scurrying specks upon the snow.

Three miles more, and the radiance of the Pass was behind him. Before him grassy slopes, tapestried with fairy flowers, swept downward to a lone, ruined serai, too exposed for his modest camp; and staying himself with chocolate, he trudged on in the wake of those scurrying specks, who represented all that there was

of food and shelter in the spacious emptiness around him.

With every mile the sun grew hotter, and the downward road lacked the exhilaration of the climb. A shadeless pathway, zigzagging across a great bare slope, dropped to a green mountain river laced with foam. Down, eternally down, Vincent plodded on, sorrowing for the heights so hardly achieved, so rapidly left behind; on, past the regular camping-ground, to an open glade set, like an emerald, in a forest of firs. Here, said Govin Singh, the Sahib would find a serai, built by a Moghul lady of high birth, where he could enjoy the seclusion he desired; and the Sahib blessed him exceedingly when at last he lay full stretch on the grass, breakfast ended, a pipe between his lips, and in his heart the exhilaration of achievement, tempered by peace without and within.

There, under lightly swaying boughs, with the scent of warm pine-needles in his nostrils, he fell asleep; and awoke in the cool of late afternoon to the resolve that here he would insist on loitering by the way, even to the extent of three or four days.

Wonderful days they were: days of unimagined beauty and serenity, of leisurely wanderings through the forest, where monkeys chattered and squirrels flitted, and the minor third of the cuckoo seemed the very voice of Home; days of desultory reading in the shadow of the pines, and nights of starry darkness quick with all the indefinable earth-scents of spring. Above all, they were days of solitude such as Vincent had not known since the Army claimed him, which was perhaps their crowning charm: and as the fourth evening drew to a close, he found himself wondering was not this spirit of solitude, this invisible essence of things—heard without speech, felt without touch—dearer to him, almost, than even the dearest woman on earth? And would it not, perhaps, always be so?

He was lying at the outer edge of the forest, with

the resistless rush of the river below, and the changeful, yet unchanging, quiet of the snows above. Trailing plumes of cloud in the west were beginning to take colour. And, as if in reply to his unspoken question, there sprang to his brain a vision of Thea Desmond in the firelight on their enchanted Christmas Eve. Brooding upon that vision, he divined a solitude more humanly perfect than he had ever yet enjoyed; he knew that—were she beside him now—the dawn of love in her eyes were better worth seeing than the break of day upon a thousand hills.

Both the knowledge and the vision so perturbed him that peace was at an end; and he gave orders for an early move next morning. He spent half the night writing to her of his journey and the wonders of the Pass: and starting at sunrise completed his descent into the valley. From the sterner, more stimulating region of pine and fir, and the silver tracery of birches in new leaf, he dropped, mile by mile, into that haze of misty blues and greens where lakes, like polished shields, came gradually into view and the snows of winter gave place to the snows of spring—plum and pear and cherry-blossom, tinged with the rose-flush of apple and peach.

A brief visit to Srinagar was occasioned by the prosaic necessity of laying in provisions and leaving instructions with the post-office Babu. Then he struck out in earnest across India's sovereign Himalayas—her rock of defence, her Olympus and giver of sacred streams.

By this time he was in fair training for the road; and the long, casual tramp that followed was an experience new, yet strangely familiar, like an echo of some former incarnation—perhaps as a wandering friar in the days of the Plantagenets?

By way of Krishtwar and Bardwar they dipped towards Chamba, whither Vincent despatched Nur Bux on an expedition to the post-office and bazaar. He returned with letters from Tintagel; a cheerful wail from Jerry, languishing in Gulistan Fort with native

officers for company — Eden being on leave; and a familiar bluish envelope addressed in Thea Desmond's untidy but very individual handwriting: an answer of more than usual promptness to his own outpouring from the Sukh Serai.

"I envy you—oh, I envy you!" she wrote in her impulsive fashion. "Thank you ever so for writing me such a wonderful description of it all; though it did make me ache to have been there too. Father and I have just come back from an enchanted trip in the Gullies. But your climbs and dawns and grandeurs quite take the shine out of our very mild adventures. Some day I *must* persuade Paul to squander his two months' leave on me, instead of on bear, and give me a taste of the real thing."

Vincent reflected, with a pang, that it would more probably be Howard's privilege to fulfil that and every other particular desire of her heart. She mentioned casually his arrival in the station, adding that it was nice to see a Creature again; and Vincent must needs torment himself with vain speculations as to the exact degree of niceness implied. It maddened him to think of Howard in undisputed possession, with all time at his command and all his will and energy set upon conquest. Thrusting aside the thought, he opened Wyndham's letter, only to learn that his mother had been quite laid up with a sharp attack of inflammation. They had thought it better not to tell him till the worst was over. But she was regaining her strength too slowly to satisfy an anxious husband, and she was intractable—as Vincent knew—on the subject of doctors.

It was a somewhat chastened seeker after detachment who renewed his march next morning. Half an hour of mere pen-and-ink contact with the world had sufficed to shatter the peace of weeks. At least he was thankful to know that his mother could not be in more capable or devoted hands: and for the other affair—if he were not such an incurable fool, he ought, by this time, to have accepted the inevitable like a

man. As it was, he felt almost glad that some time would elapse before letters could reach him again. And his joy in the sheer movement and freedom of this perpetual going, in his companion's long spells of silence and his own queer love of isolation, increased rather, as day followed day with a sameness that never grew monotonous. Now it was an arduous climb to the heights he loved, now the rounding of a mighty spur, and now the eternal zigzag down to sun-filled valleys, musical with snow-fed streams.

More and ever more clearly Vincent came to realise that for him the supreme charm of his modest adventure was contained in the word freedom: freedom from the restraints of living in a herd; from the effort of incessant striving to be or seem other than he was: and not least from the embarrassing attentions of Miss Williams, that his move to Hangu had scotched but not killed. Even there he could not escape those lilac-scented notes to which politeness compelled occasional replies. But here—here, he was immune from all. He was free. At night he slept upon that knowledge, and in the morning it put a new song in his mouth; from which it may be seen that Thea's uneasiness on his account sprang from a very true perception of his character. As yet, however, the temptation was not towards Hinduism, but towards the renewal, in a more definite form, of the longing that had assailed him on the cliffs of Tintagel two years ago.

At first it came as a vague impulse, which he tried honestly to ignore. But ever and again it returned with distracting insistence—when he lay resting after a long day's march, or woke early and watched the greater awakening of earth; till the vague impulse shaped itself into a practical possibility for a man with two hundred a year and tastes of the simplest, given a generous margin for books. He even arrived at picturing a chalet in some beauty-spot beyond Kashmir; a book-lined chalet, where he could carry on the study of ethnology and origins, to which

he could now only devote a few ineffectual hours snatched from exercise or sleep. There he could imbibe knowledge; achieve, perhaps, the poetic drama of his secret ambition, and explore the length and breadth of these majestic Himalayas whenever the spirit moved him.

This was the vision that crystallised in his brain upon a certain June evening, as he lay smoking on a sun-warmed slope under a group of deodars; and the glamour of it blinded him to the obvious drawbacks involved. He saw it simply as the one means of attaining such detachment of spirit as might enable him to accept, without passionate rebellion, the marriage of Thea Desmond to a man worthier of her than he could ever hope to be. Certainly, if she married Howard, he could not stay on in the regiment. He doubted if he could stay in the Army, that had become, for him, so closely linked with all her soldier enthusiasms and ideals. And to-night—his last night of solitude—the idea haunted him more persistently than ever. To-night he even asked himself, "After all—why not?"

Could he, in less than three weeks, return for good to the harness, the drudgery and restraints of soldiering? Here in this vast natural sanctuary of peace and freedom, the thing seemed unthinkable; and some imp of perversity within him harped on the least inviting aspects of regimental life — the monotonous routine, the dominion of trifles, Eden's temper, old Williams' stale jokes and broad stories. Unconsciously he was making out a case for himself; a case shorn of many important modifications. The Samana conditions, though preferable, were temporary; and Vincent, taking the longer view, found little to encourage or stimulate him in the immediate prospect ahead. So completely, for the time being, had he fallen in love with the good company of hills and forests and streams, that he could not even look forward whole-heartedly to Hardwar and the meeting with his pilgrim friend.

For by now, after nearly a month of steady marching, he was encamped in the hills beyond Simla; and to-morrow he must descend by tonga into the furnace of the Plains. Since Chamba, there had been no intrusion of the outer world to upset his equilibrium. But Simla post-office was one of his addresses; and thither Govin Singh had gone, on a hill pony, in quest of letters and a native dress suitable for this most unusual, yet most admired Sahib, whose capacity for silence and for long-distance walking entitled even his strangest whims to unquestioning respect. And Vincent's whim of marching to Kedarnath in the guise of a Punjabi was grounded on a sensitive and very characteristic reluctance to seem too obviously a mere intruder on sanctities as real to him, in his own fashion, as to the actual worshippers in theirs: an idea heartily commended by Sir Thakur Das.

Now, as he lay awaiting the orderly's return, he sighted him ambling round a curve of the road. There hung a bag over his shoulders, and not all Vincent's monastic visions could quiet the flutter of impatience at his heart.

In due time, he found himself the richer by four envelopes and one parcel—a copy of the Roumanian ballads, ordered in the hope that he might one day find courage to send it to Thea. The letters gave a friendly flavour to his camp dinner under the deodar, while the last remnants of daylight faded from earth and sky: a better account of his mother, a close-written sheet of friendly interest from Desmond, and the coveted blue envelope, that contained no hint of the dread news. But to-day her lively record of Hill Station doings ended on a deeper note.

"I often wonder," she wrote, "when we, up here, are fooling about at our tennis and dances, just where you've got to in your wanderings, and if you've started yet on your *pukka* pilgrimage. Most of all I wonder—are you really finding any big truth out there, or are you only running away from things

in general and Army things in particular? Of course I don't deserve an answer to my impertinent question. But I wonder hugely all the same!"

Vincent read and re-read these few lines with a deepening crease between his brows. The direct question irked him, almost angered him; the more so, perhaps, that it went between the joints of his harness. He could almost hear the tone of her voice and see the gleam of mischief in her eyes.

Would she never take him seriously, because he lacked the concrete character foundations of a Howard? Only the tender corrective of her last spoken words saved him from suspecting a hint of scorn in her question. It hit the nail on the head with a directness worthy of her father, and so spurred him to self-defence that he held a long and eloquent discourse with her there under the stars. If as yet, he argued, he had found no vital truth, he had still learnt much that only withdrawal could teach. He had learnt the beginnings of the great art of meditation. He had achieved a clearer perception of 'the Real in the midst of this Unreal,' the One Unseen, made manifest through a million forms, from flower to star. He was also, he hoped and believed, in a fair way to finding himself.

Then, having silenced that visionary Thea, he slipped into his blanket-bag and slept till dawn. But her provoking question pursued him to the verge of sleep and challenged him afresh the moment he opened his eyes.

CHAPTER II.

"He who thinks to reach God by running away from the world, when and where does he expect to meet Him?"—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

"TELL me, my friend, have you anywhere in Europe a sight to equal this, for proof that, under all diversities of race and creed, the human soul is one, even as Brahma is one? Here, in these tents about us, are Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, and Bengalis; not to speak of many others, including yourself—an onlooker, perhaps a learner, from the other side of the world?"

Thus Sir Thakur Das, with a courtly incline of his head towards Vincent, who sat beside him under the lee of a rock, while around and below them that motley yet impressive concourse of pilgrims was settling down for the night. Beyond the camp, the hills rose sharply above narrow gorges and pathways narrower still. Ravines and ridges showed scarcely a trace of vegetation, save the sturdy juniper that out-climbs the birch and pine; and sheltered places still held gleaming remnants of last year's snow.

Since their great outsetting from Hardwar, that untiring crowd of worshippers had been tramping steadily up and up toward their ultimate goal, the shrine and glacier of Kedarnath. In every sense it was a journey from the foothills to the heights; from the city of the Sacred River to the stainless abode of God. Even the frail and the aged—and of these there were no lack—seemed miraculously lifted above the fatigues and rigours of the road. Daily the upward track, worn by the feet of thousands, grew steeper

and more rugged. Nightly the moon gave a more generous dole of light: for on the day of her zenith the shrine must be reached. Under the young moon the setting forth; under the waning moon the homeward march: such is the law of the pilgrims' way—a law determined by an instinctive sense of the beauty of the world that, for India, signifies God's most direct cry to the soul. And Vincent—though he had not yet turned Hindu—found his own soul curiously stirred by this glad, arduous pilgrimage, with the moon for presiding deity and a thoughtful golden-tongued saint for company.

In little more than a week they had climbed many thousand feet above Hardwar, a miniature Benares, set close to the gorge whence the Great Mother descends in majesty from the foothills to the plains. Here Vincent had joined Sir Thakur Das, in whom he speedily recognised an intellect and a personality of no mean order. Nor was he alone in that discovery. Already his companion was known to scores of their fellow-travellers as a Yogi of outstanding sanctity and wisdom, even in an assembly largely compounded of India's holy men, whose name is legion.

To-night, at a friendly gathering of these, he had risen up and testified to his belief in the essential unity of all striving, untainted by personal desire; and in the consummation of a regenerate India, weaned from idolatrous forms to direct communion with That Supreme who, in many guises, ceaselessly woos the unresting, uncompelled spirit of man. And they listened—some with assent, some with challenging interruptions—that strange company of ash-smeared, yellow-robed devotees of every conceivable deity in the Hindu pantheon.

Vincent, looking on from afar, had only caught a phrase here and there: but he would not soon forget the vision of that one man's face illumined by the inner light of sincerity and faith. Virile and bearded, with bold outlines of nose and brow, powerful cheek-bones and the wide intent gaze of the seer, it was a

face worth watching; and Vincent was watching it now, as they sat in the aftermath of sunset beside their fire of juniper scrub; for the nights grew chilly at this altitude.

"In all that crowd," he said, answering—after a thoughtful pause — his companion's last remark, "there cannot be one who feels himself more utterly a learner than I do. It is my great regret that I have not enough knowledge of the language——"

"*Which* language?" the Indian took him up, smiling. "In almost every tent they speak a different dialect. Yet, could we now stroll among them and listen to the talk within, you would wonder not so much at differences of speech as at the unity of theme—lives of saints, fidelity to *gurus*,[1] freedom from fetters of personality and desire."

Vincent nodded. "I can well believe it. But for us of the West that last is hard to understand. Freedom from personality would mean loss of all that we prize most in life. For us, it is personality that spells greatness; not renunciation, but fulfilment of desire—which we call ambition, the mainspring of progress——"

"Not all progress, my friend. Only that form of it which most appeals to your practical genius: progress in wealth, in science, and the so complete perfecting of machines and machinery that there is grave danger the inanimate shall become lord of the animate, and the soul, losing its true centre, be entangled in the world of multiplicity; smothered under sheer weight of bodily well-being. I speak with knowledge, having achieved power and possessions and renounced the fruits of achievement. I speak also from what I have seen in your wonderful country and from my own experience under an Indian ruler influenced from his youth by Western ideals."

"Very faulty, many of them," Vincent admitted frankly. "But not to be condemned wholesale."

Sir Thakur Das—who had a trick of speaking with

[1] Priests.

his head up and his eyes fixed on some distant object —shifted them now from a flushed snow-peak to the human face at his side.

"He who condemns wholesale," he said, smiling, "merely makes parade of his own ignorance. Yet, a lover of India may be permitted to doubt if those ideals are best suited for her needs. Somewhere, in this turmoil of world-progress, the lamp of the spirit must be tended and kept from extinction. That will never be done where all is seen from the angle of self-interest. Therefore this patient, devotional tending has most often been the privilege of the East—that is, in every sense, a temple of dawn. Always, in periods of spiritual darkness, men look for the star in the East. To keep that star alight we need freedom of soul; the single vision, unclouded by the lust of I and Me: twin gods of the modern world. To us it seems a fault in your Western civilisation that, while prating of freedom and zealous for the body's welfare, it tends to grind down all men and nations of earth to one pattern—even to one way of dress and of life—with little regard for race and climate, and even less regard for the spirit's need. Now we in India, beneath a hundred diversities, are linked by the inner unity of worship. India's arms are open to all sincere devotees, even as the arms of a true mother to all children; and here you have, within a small compass, the spirit of our most ancient country. Here, in this simple and sincere impulse of worship, you have the true unity that includes diversity; not imposed from without, but free and natural as the fellowship of the pilgrims' way, where all men are our brothers and all women our sisters—as you have seen."

Yes, unquestionably Vincent had seen and marvelled at the prevailing spirit of friendliness, the courtesies and refinements of salutation; the happy holiday air of the women; the rapt look on faces of descending pilgrims who, in their own fashion, had talked with God. And he had not merely seen: he had spoken

with many queer-looking monks in his own language and—to the best of his ability—in theirs. He had succeeded, thus, in striking up an acquaintance with a Naked *Swami*[1]—a gaunt muscular being with matted locks and beard, who wore neither ashes nor a shred of clothing beyond the prescribed loin-cloth; and endured, with equal immunity, extremes of heat or cold. Yet, this wild-looking savage moved and spoke with the natural courtesy of good breeding, and revealed in his talk a mind hardly less cultured than Vincent's own. Moving and thinking on the impersonal plane of the devotee, he appeared to accept this most unusual Sahib simply as a fellow-seeker after truth; and Vincent, for his part, felt increasingly at ease with these cultured, yet primitive, brothers and sisters of the path. It is the artificial urbanities of the drawing-room world, the 'multitude of locked souls with labels of smiling faces' that shrivel up the over-sensitive and make them so acutely conscious of their own disabilities. The man who stumbles and stammers in a drawing-room may feel modestly yet magnificently sure of himself in the most motley company on the open road.

Something of this kind Vincent had experienced since his arrival at Hardwar. In an atmosphere free from self-consciousness, criticism, and insistence on the personal note, he simply forgot to be shy. His *choga* and turban fostered the illusion of temporary escape from himself; a mental holiday, most salutary and tonic, for the self-conscious modern man. No one save his travelling companions knew who he was. Better still, no one cared. The fact that he was a fellow-pilgrim sufficed: and weeks of exposure had so tanned his skin that casual observers took him for a hill man from the north, if they seriously considered him at all. To his own world, for the moment, he was lost; and he was young enough to enjoy the sensation.

He and his friend sat late over their fire that night; but they were up next morning earlier than usual

[1] Holy man.

in view of the last terrible climb to the village of Kedarnath. Early as they were, scores of the devout were already a-foot, laughing and singing as they breasted the upward slope, praising God and His mountains, and filling their lungs with great draughts of the morning. Who shall say how long before dawn that ecstatic exodus had begun; or who among them all was the first to take up his bed and walk?

Though the sun had not yet risen, tents were falling on every side: from the yellow strip of cloth, that sufficed the ascetic, to the enclosed quarters of high-caste ladies, hopeful that Mahadev, beholding their zeal, would grant the supreme gift of a son. These travelled in scarlet *palkis*, hidden from prying eyes and from the glories of the road. But there were women of lesser rank, who went unveiled: the younger ones decked as for a festival; widows, in the coarse white garment of that sad sisterhood; *sanyásins*,[1] draped in yellow cloth and hung about with rosaries; old women, too, bent almost double above their alpen-stocks, hobbled eagerly up that hard and narrow way to the shrine of the Great God Shiva.

Harder and narrower than ever, it was, on this last upward march; thronged more closely than ever with worshippers, coolies, cooks, and food-vendors: a true democracy of the road. Yellow and salmon-coloured ropes gleamed in all directions. Of ash-smeared bodies, begging-bowls, and strangely distorted limbs, there seemed no end. For Kedarnath ranks high as a shrine of good omen to *sadhus;* since here came their great mediæval teacher, Sankaracharya, and fell into a trance from which he never woke again.

On and up they surged, Vincent and his friend in the midst of them, each in his own fashion deeply stirred by the infectious spirit of enthusiasm that seemed to mount with their mounting feet, and carried them, breathless but undaunted, up the last few miles of sheer climbing—to many, a veritable triumph of spirit over flesh. And when, at last, that congested

[1] Holy women.

crowd emerged on to the higher table-lands, it overflowed them, like a river in flood-time, and hurried forward with eagerness renewed; jewelled turf underfoot, sun-bright peaks above. Returning streams of worshippers met and mingled with the advancing wave; each greeting each with the incessant antiphon: "*Jai! Jai! Kedar Nath Swami ki jai!*"[1]

While yet the village was a mile off, the temple came into view, snow-peak and glacier rising sheer beyond, as it were the great god, Lord of the Himalayas, keeping eternal watch over his shrine. At the sight there went up a spontaneous shout of praise: "Mahadev! Refuge of Weariness! Protect us, O thou Terrible! *Hara*—the Free! The Free!"

In the midst of that stirring clamour Sir Thakur Das remained silent; but he greeted the mountain with a gesture of salutation, and his face was illumined as Vincent had seen it the night before. Then, with that far-seeing gaze of his lifted to the heights, he strode forward, to all appearance unaware of the jubilant crowd and of the companion who steadily kept pace with him, yet spoke not a word.

Arrived at the village itself, they found the main temple closed till the hour of worship. Crowning a steep flight of steps, it dominated the end of a long narrow street, itself dominated by the glacier and towering peak beyond. Not till sunset would the great carven doors be opened: and as evening drew on, chill mists drifting down from the mountains shrouded shrine and worshippers in a dense, ever-shifting veil. Cowled figures, pacing to and fro before the temple, loomed large and ghostly; while from the camp without, ghosts and ever more ghosts came thronging through the mist. For the hour was at hand.

Sunset and moonrise were shrouded by that drifting veil; but with the oncoming of darkness it dissolved. Stars flashed out. Over the eastern peaks the new-risen moon glowed like a lamp: below, on the steps of

[1] Victory to the Swami of Kedarnath.

the temple, lights were swinging, bells clanging; and, as the evening *arati* ended, there went up a shout of ecstasy. It was the moment. A voice commanded and the crowd fell apart, like the waters of the Red Sea, leaving a clear space down the length of the street. Then—up through that space, and on up the steep steps into the shrine, the rush of the pilgrims began.

Stumbling, struggling, pushing; some silent, some breaking into cries of rapture; they swept forward, on and up, on and up, pouring in through the great south entrance and out again by another eastern doorway; pausing only in their transit to bend over the image and touch the sacred point of it with their hearts. It was a sight to stir the most hardened sceptic, the most sluggish imagination; a sight well worth the strenuous marches from Hardwar.

So thought Vincent, standing in black shadow among the crowd—one drop of Western spirit in an ocean of Eastern fervour. The risen moon splashed the houses opposite with radiance. The lights of earth were fitful and few. By those fitful lights, he snatched glimpse after glimpse of passing faces —eager, intent, uplifted, impatient: more and always more. It seemed incredible that one small village could hold them all——

And while he stood watching them, there flashed through his brain an impulse—or was it an inspiration?—so strange as to seem almost fantastic; yet, in his present mood, so alluring that he dared not look it full in the face. For it amounted to throwing up the Army, if needs must, and offering to accompany Sir Thakur Das—as *chela* or disciple—on his exhaustive tour of India's religious centres; a tour conceived in the large and somewhat misty hope of weaning her from those idolatrous practices and beliefs that foul the mainspring of her spiritual life. It was an idea at once stimulating and startling; but, in an atmosphere charged with other-worldliness, it had not, by any means, an air of utter impossibility. From the

moment of meeting, Sir Thakur Das had attracted him strangely; an attraction that increased with knowledge; and a year or two of intimate companionship with such a man would make no bad prelude to any form of work or service. Instinctively he glanced up at the shadowy presence beside him and found himself wondering—had the inspiration perhaps been telepathic; wondering also—would he ever dare venture a proposal so boldly unconventional? At the mere prospect of speech, his sensitive spirit, feeling out toward things new and strange, drew in its horns. He decided that the prevailing spirit of Kedarnath must have gone to his head. And deliberately he forced his attention back to the faces that still went surging past.

It dwindled, at last, that great stream of human faith and fervour, and the watching crowd melted away mysteriously, like shadows of a dream. Then Vincent Leigh, British subaltern, and Thakur Das, late Minister of Education, stepped over to the moonlit side of the almost empty street.

For a moment they stood still gazing up at the closed doorway of the temple. Then they exchanged a look of complete understanding.

"Truly, God is everywhere," said the Indian gravely. "These simple people, though often misled by those who make profit of their ignorance, are not deluded. Countless miles they have travelled, simply for this—to touch 'God' with their hearts. That, they could equally have done in their own homes. Yet, I repeat—they are not deluded. What said the Blessed One of Kurukshetra? 'All worship is worship of me.' For myself, I also would touch God in another fashion than theirs. What need of sleep when He, the Supreme Comrade, knocks at the door?—And you, my friend?"

"I have seen things a man does not forget," Vincent answered simply, with his eyes on the moonlit peak that struck upward, like a sword unsheathed. "Sleep seems almost a sin on a night like this. I shall walk out along the road to the glacier."

Thakur Das made a gesture of benediction. "God be with you. We go different ways." But before moving on, he paused and regarded Vincent with that brooding gaze of his. "Many of your race I have known, my friend. Some I have greatly admired. But to none has my heart gone out so swiftly and strongly as to yourself. Even from your letters I foreknew. It is strange."

So strange it seemed to Vincent, that hardly could he refrain from prompt confession of his own desire. But although to-night he felt miles removed from the Vincent of Kohat, the issues involved were too vital for hasty action. Short of such outright response, speech was hopelessly difficult.

"I would like to thank you, sir, for telling me that," he said, instinctively using the Western term of respect. "But I can only say that I have never yet come so near true friendship with any of my own fellow-countrymen, except one; and he, like yourself, is much older than I—Sir Theo Desmond. Perhaps you know the name?"

Thakur Das smiled. "Who does not? They say he will become Commander-in-Chief. If so—well for us. It is by men like General Desmond—brave, upright, and of an understanding heart, that England holds India. As a race we have even greater need of the understanding heart than of the understanding brain. Good-night, my friend."

Again that gesture of benediction—and he passed on to the pilgrims' camp; while Vincent took the road past the glacier towards the peak of Mahápanth. That chance admission—if chance it were—gave his new inspiration a tempting air of possibility. It would not be the first time, after all, that an Eastern saint had attracted a Western disciple: and what a man! To-night his impressionable spirit was touched to strange issues by the infectious fervour of a multitude, the dreamlike beauty of his surroundings, and a queer sense of apartness from that everyday India, weltering, twelve thousand feet below him, in the furnace of a

Punjab June. Had he been translated into a planet, he could scarcely have felt more remote from it all: and while his feet moved over the narrow mountain path, his thoughts moved with an equal swiftness, exploring the unknown region ahead, before he ventured on the concrete question—shall I, or shall I not?

To travel and travel and absorb knowledge, as a sponge absorbs water! From early days it had been one of his most cherished dreams; and to-night, in the moonlight under Mahápanth, it appeared more than ever worth the delay it would entail in coming to grips with life. To Vincent that delay seemed no very serious drawback. It was his chief weakness, from the Western standpoint, that he did not readily pin his faith to one definite goal and subordinate everything else to the task of 'getting there'; that he tended to see life more as a process of becoming than a process of achieving. But even when the lure of the new inspiration seemed strongest, he was aware of lurking resistance within, as if a certain small, resolute hand plucked at the reins of his runaway fancy. For a time he ignored, almost resented, that gentle, authoritative intrusion. If she meant to marry Howard, what right had she to check the one impulse that might make the loss of her endurable?

He stopped abruptly in his long swinging stride. At this point the path crossed a cliff that, on the khud side, fell sheer into nothingness; and Vincent knew he had reached the famous precipice, which in daylight commanded a majestic view of valleys, rivers, and heights. By the same token, he knew that he had come four miles from Kedarnath. A little beyond the precipice he found a convenient boulder and there sat down, resolved that his future should be thought out to some conclusion, before he returned to camp.

By now the whole earth was drowned in moonshine. All eastward slopes and crests were bright with it, all westward spaces plunged in blackest shadow; and in the sinister chasm, that fell away from the path, light was altogether swallowed up by darkness.

Vincent, mildly curious, tossed a stone over the edge and listened.

Not a sound, nor the ghost of a sound, broke the stillness that brooded over heights and depths and that solitary human fragment at grips with the problem of one inconsiderable life.

Suddenly, with a start, he realised that he was no longer alone. A moving shadow on the path heralded the appearance of a figure stamped in silhouette upon the brightness beyond. It came forward slowly, as if lost in meditation. Half-way across the precipice it halted, moved to the edge of the path and there remained, with head slightly raised, confronting the vastness above and the vastness below. The head was bare, and Vincent could just discern the outline of draperies that suggested a woman — probably a *sanyásin*, of whom there had been many on the road. The mechanical movement of her hands suggested that she was telling her beads.

Vincent's first feeling had been mild annoyance at any intrusion upon his own magnificent privacy. But the stillness of the shadowy figure fascinated him. There issued from it now a faint rhythmical murmur. She was praying—that dedicated woman—to Shiva, Lord of Mountains, quintessence of strength and tenderness; Shiva, refuge of lonely souls, unappreciated or at odds with their kind—the ugly and troublesome, the clumsy ones who talk loudly and upset everything, though they mean no harm; the cranks obsessed by one idea. To the souls of all human misfits, Mahadev is so peculiarly gracious that they are known as Shiva's demons. It is their privilege to be used upon his errands. This, and much else in the way of Indian lore, Vincent had learnt from his friend the Naked Swami; and had promptly included himself in the ranks of that very mixed company, rejected by earth yet deemed not unfit for the service of a god.

The intrusion of that still figure had deflected his thoughts into these channels. And now, while he sat

idly watching, the devotee flung out her arms with a low passionate cry: "*Mahadev! Mahadev*—I come!"

Before Vincent could spring to his feet, the path was empty; and he stood alone in the moonlight, listening with all his being, even as he had listened, in mere curiosity, for the sound of the falling stone.

But as the stone fell, so fell the woman, with never a sound—fragments flung into the void: one in simple carelessness, the other in an ecstatic impulse of union with the Eternal Beauty of Things. And Vincent had a nightmare vision of them falling, ceaselessly falling, right through the world into limitless space beyond. How many devotees had the magnetism of that precipice swiftly and silently released from 'the body of this death'? Such events, he knew, are not unusual on a Himalayan pilgrimage: but it is one thing to hear of, and another thing to witness, that spontaneous flight of soul, in the ecstasy of attainment: the impulse of a liberated spirit, not of an unsound mind. At least, so India views the matter: and who shall say if she is altogether wrong?

Vincent himself stood confounded and deeply impressed. He also stood rebuked. It was as if that vanished shadow had said, in effect: "You who sit there toying with the battle of life, could you ever rise to this crowning renunciation of the seen and known, for the unseen and unknown?"

To such a faith, thought Vincent, pacing the strip of moonlit path, even the great withdrawal might be permissible. And what of his own? Dared he even apply the word to that which was a wavering, tentative affair of the intellect rather than a brave impulsion of the soul? Yet — could not faith be cultivated like any other faculty? And would he ever find conditions more favourable to that end than an extended pilgrimage with Sir Thakur Das? The appeal of the higher Hinduism was undeniable: still stronger was the appeal of isolation and simplification essential to the monastic life. "Taken in big doses"

—he recalled Sir Theo's phrase—whither might they not lead him——?

At this point he checked himself and stood looking across outer darkness to the dreaming snows. Again he was aware of that small hand on the reins. Again her haunting question challenged him. "Are you really finding any big truth out there? Or are you only running away from things in general?"

Those words, at this critical moment, were like a white light flashed on the uncertain glimmer of his doubts. And by that light he saw his supposed 'inspiration' for the thing it was—simply the old temptation in a new form: temptation to accept the fate from which his mother had agonised to save him; to give up the fight against everything that made life difficult and toughened the fibre of his being. Seen from this angle, his exalted impulse looked very much like a blind expedient of cowardice and pride: and all the Briton in him, all the generations of soldier and sailor Leighs, rose up in protest against such ignoble surrender. His mother reckoned on him to make an honest fight against that mixture of pride, sensibility, and reserve which isolates the incurably shy. And—if he were not mistaken—Someone Else reckoned on him too: Someone who appeared strangely eager to defend him from himself. He could feel her counterpull against that exalted impulse almost as if she were present in the flesh; and remembering her gentle, yet persistent warnings, her question seemed less a challenge than a plea. There were mad moments when not all the Howards in creation could stifle his belief that she must care more than a little: and he believed it now.

The bare possibility braced him to dismiss once for all the craven longing to elude the battle of life: and in that moment his eyes were opened to perceive that, for him, here was the true path of renunciation. To genius or to a commanding faith all things were permissible: but for such as he—an

ordinary man, with a more than ordinary share of sensibility — tall talk about renouncing a world that evinced small need of him savoured too much of spiritual self-indulgence. Life in which there is most of life—that was the obvious remedy for his ailment; and it could be come at neither through books nor dreaming, but through contact, rough and tender, with men:—in brief, the Army prescription, so scornfully dismissed two years ago. His father, Wyndham, Desmond, all upheld it. And more compelling still was the memory of that low, urgent voice in the firelight on Christmas Eve: "I am sure—utterly sure it would be your salvation, if you'd only give up wobbling and stick to it like a man."

Well—from to-night onward there would be an end of wobbling. He had found at least a fragment of truth in his pilgrimage to the heights. As for the future — in his stoical mood he would not stoop to bribe himself with sugar-plums. Win her or not, he would obey her behest. To the utmost of his ability he would up and play the man——

It was near midnight when he reached the pilgrims' camp—a new being, with new life in his veins. Too well he realised the evanescence of such exalted moods: but he realised also that the will and not the mood is the determining factor of victory.

CHAPTER III.

"Our feet have one country and our dreams another."
—COMPTON LEITH.

IT was upon the third evening of their downward march that Vincent felt impelled to speak frankly of his inspired impulse and to discover how it would have been received. They were sitting together, as usual, near the remnants of the fire that had cooked their evening meal. Sunset brought no moonlight now; and Vincent, watching his companion's face in the gleam of small, uncertain flames that flickered into life and out again, realised with a pang how few were the remaining days of a comradeship unique as it was unforgettable.

"That same thought came also in my own mind," Sir Thakur Das said quietly.

"In Kedarnath, on the temple steps?" Vincent asked with unconcealed eagerness.

"Yes, that night on the temple steps."

"Then I was right! I had a fancy that the idea flashed from your brain to mine. Did you send it me consciously? I *must* know."

The Hindu smiled at a distant ridge. "It is possible. It came very strongly. And I was curious—would it wake response?"

That tantalising admission put a severe strain on Vincent's determination to have done with "wobbling."

"It did, with a vengeance," he confessed frankly.

"That night I came very near throwing up my profession and—for a time—my world."

"No, no. Too grave risk for one of your race. And you have too much promise——"

"Promise?"

Vincent raised a sceptical eyebrow, and the elder man turned on him a look of peculiar kindliness.

"Yes—in my opinion. Moreover, too early withdrawal is not well for the young, except in rarest conditions. The soul must *come forth* to realise itself in fruition. Not to neglect, but to purify action—there is the perfect counsel; to make such fine balance between Within and Without, that work, distilled from taint of self-interest, shall itself become a path of union with Brahma. What said the Blessed One Himself? 'Man does not attain freedom merely by not engaging in action; nor perfection by mere renunciation.' Bravely to take; bravely to give;—that is the true service and the perfect freedom, as it is written in your own Holy Book. Believe me, my friend—for this matter has long and deeply engaged my thoughts—the call to separation is for a time only. It is for the few, not the many; for the elder rather than the younger, whose first duty is to carry on their race.

Vincent's smile had a touch of wistfulness. "Ah! But you people make provision accordingly. With us, he who lacks the favour of women is debarred from serving his race—in that way."

"True. We, unpractical ones, could never leave a matter so vital to caprice of the individual."

"In fact, you subordinate the individual to the state?"

"In a measure—yes. With us of the East, there is real need to check too strong ascetic tendency. Much wisdom, therefore, in the decree of our Brahmins, that it is the first religious obligation to become father of a son; otherwise a man will damage his prestige in this world and his soul's welfare in the next. But for such as you there is yet hope——"

"A gleam. Rather a doubtful one!"

"Follow your gleam, then, to make it certainty."

"That was my resolve after spending half the night on the Mahápanth road. I think—up there, I reached a clearer vision of things——" He paused, looking thoughtfully into the glowing embers, flameless now; then, impelled to further confidence in this man—who had done more for him than either knew—he enlarged a little on his craving for solitude, his instinctive gravitation towards the life apart. So evident was his companion's interest that he was even moved to mention the queer sense of repeating a former experience that had been with him so vividly on the march.

Sir Thakur Das smiled and raised his eyebrows. "Karma," was all he said.

"But what, precisely, do you people mean by that? Something more vast and psychic than Kismet or Fate?"

"True. There is no precise term in your Western dictionaries for many root-words of Indian philosophy. Karma is, for us, the unending wheel of birth and death and change; not through one life only but through whole cycles of lives. Fruit of a past cause, seed of a coming effect—it is, so to speak, the soul's equipment for this journey of life."

"And in my case——?"

"In your case Hindu philosophy would infer some earlier attainment to holiness, marred by a fall from that estate which involved this passing return to a lower plane. But still, in the core of your being, those higher intimations of memory remain. They are Karma, as I just now said—harvest of your ancient wishes, secret assurance of things to come. Have you never read how the great Akbar himself had strong conviction that in earlier life, as a monk, he had broken his vow through love of a woman; and because he had fallen from sanctity, he returned to work out his Karma through exalted position of Emperor. It is a common belief in India that great rulers are often great ascetics, working out some past error in that highest form of

human activity. Indeed — what I think few of you English know—this very belief concerning your own Queen has taken such strong hold of our people that chiefly for this reason she is so sacred in their eyes. Still greater would be their worship of her, did she now retire in favour of her son and devote her few remaining years to God. But that is an impulse more natural to the East than to the West. For yourself, my friend, the call is clear to work out your salvation in action: not the withdrawn, but the transfigured life, the brave going forth of the spirit, eager for service and knowledge. Is that counsel too hard for one of your nature?"

"It is sane and sound counsel," Vincent answered with quiet emphasis. "Some day, perhaps, I may achieve; then, like you, I shall be free to leave the world of action——"

"No, no, you mistake. The world I leave is the world of greed and intrigue and intoxication of power —passports to success in native States and many other States of higher civilisation. I am withdrawn only for a time, to search the deeper recesses of my soul and test by the light of reason those intimations that come to me on waves of exalted emotion: to take bravely, as I said, that afterwards I may give bravely to those who will make the new India for which we elders can only prepare the way. It is my hope to join with some followers of our great Maharshi near Calcutta, and in that region to found a forest school on ancient lines; adapted, where must be, to modern needs. But that is a subject too large for present discussion. My chief concern just now is for you: my chief hope that you shall not lose the power and poise, within yourself, that you have gained from communion with the mountains and the Lord of Mountains. As there remains always one point of perfect stillness in the heart of a cyclone, so may you retain, even in the fervour of action, a hidden sanctuary where the flame of your soul shall burn unwavering as a lamp in a sheltered spot. Though it is not permitted that you become my

chela in the flesh, I shall never lose hold of you in the spirit. Be very sure of that."

So speaking, he rose, and with his gracious gesture of benediction passed on to his tent.

It was a long while before Vincent followed his example. To-night, hope for the future was strong in him; hope intensified by the knowledge that there travelled on before him, to Murree, a certain letter despatched from Kedarnath the morning after his vigil. In that letter, written at the flood-tide of exaltation, he had come so near to revealing the true state of his heart, that if she cared in the least degree she could hardly fail to read between the lines. In that case, the moment he looked into her truthful eyes, he would know——

For now he intended to see her; possibly even to claim her—were it not too late. He calculated that by doubling two marches he could just achieve twenty-four hours in Murree before his time was up. This he had told her in his letter. Could she fail to understand? By way of clinching matters, he had decided to send the Roumanian Ballads; and on the fly-leaf—below the simple inscription, "To Thea Desmond, from V. L."—he had boldly added Shelley's lines—

> "Wilt thou accept not,
> The worship the heart lifts above
> And the heavens reject not;
> The desire of the moth for the star,
> Of the night for the morrow,
> The devotion to something afar
> From the sphere of our sorrow?"

It had been necessary, after that, to pack and despatch the parcel immediately, lest courage evaporate and the fly-leaf be torn out at the last moment. By the time the first twinges of alarm assailed him, the parcel had been safely out of reach, speeding down to Hardwar by the hand of Govin Singh, who had twenty-four hours of start of himself and Sir Thakur Das, and urgent orders to double marches whenever

he could. Outwardly, Vincent's concern had been to catch the English mail; inwardly, he was consumed with dread lest his tentative, belated venture should prove too tentative and belated after all. Reluctant to pester her with his doings, he had written nothing, for three weeks, beyond a few hurried lines from Simla; nor had he heard from her since the launching of that momentous question, which had turned the scale at the most critical moment of his life. And in three weeks—anything might have happened. Howard was no laggard in love, like himself.

With every downward march impatience grew; and by way of anodyne, he devoted the evenings to a close study of the Gita, under the illuminating guidance of one who practically knew it by heart. He found it—as Sir Thakur Das had said—a trumpet-call to action; action, lit by the flame of faith and knowledge that consumes all egoism, all sluggishness of soul.

So, while his feet descended and the heat grew more intense, hope climbed steadily higher; till there came an evening of breathless stillness—when he found himself, at last, alone in his tent, with the letters from Hardwar post-office actually beside him. Again there failed not the bluish envelope, but it was thinner than usual; and in tearing it open, he noted, with shame, the unsteadiness of his hand. The letter, written in a hurry, scarcely filled three sides of a sheet; but he saw at a glance that it spelled reprieve, and in the first rush of relief nothing else mattered at all.

"Dear Mr Leigh," she wrote, "You seem to have disappeared from the world! When are we going to hear of you again? I was rather expecting another splendid description. Perhaps—if I'm patient I shall get it in time! It's glorious up here this month; and on the 27th Father and I are giving a dance. I'm to be allowed a free hand, and it's going to be a really, truly, utterly success—in quite a modest sort of way. But I can't make you envious, because you're too dignified to twiddle round on your toes! Perhaps if I

promised to keep two sitting-outs, you might be tempted to hurry up with your pilgrimage and spend a few days here? And if you don't turn up, I'll heap coals on your head by sitting out with your ghost! Any way, it will be nice to have my one Kohat partner —Mr Howard. And the faithful Pocket Cherub will be here in July——"

So she ran on, in her lightest vein, and at the end of the third page she remained his "hopefully and sincerely, Thea Desmond."

Tempted? Of course he was tempted. If he left by the mail train to-night, it could just be done. He glanced at the date of her letter—the 15th. It must have been lying here for days; and she, perhaps, not realizing the reason of his seeming ungraciousness. Then fear pricked him. There might be later news. He glanced through the rest. Nothing from Mrs Eden or the General; but a faint whiff of lilac preceded the discovery of a heliotrope envelope addressed in a clear, finicky hand—the very antithesis of the writing he loved. It was a foretaste of Kohat and persecution. But since this particular letter hailed from Murree, and had been posted only two days ago, he forgave its intrusion and hurriedly tore it open, without giving a thought to the fact that she had by some means discovered his address. Tender enquiries after himself, and his supposed shooting trip, filled the first page; but on the next he found the name he sought and the 'interesting news' he dreaded; news he would sooner have had from any quarter than this—

"We are all on the tiptoe of expectation up here over Mr Howard and Miss Desmond, which of course won't surprise *you* at all! No Kohati could have expected anything else. He's been living in her pocket since he came in from the Gullies. No eyes for any of us! And as for her—if she doesn't mean to marry him she's the most outrageous flirt in India. Of course

any one can *see* she cares for nothing but admiration. Mr Howard's not the only one. But he seems pretty plainly *the* one. In fact I *have* heard they've been privately engaged for a week or more. It's an awful pity you aren't spending some of your leave up here——"

But at this point Vincent flung down the letter, set his teeth to keep back the futile curse, and hurried out into a breathless dusk aglow with the fires of sunset. The stifling atmosphere of his hill tent seemed suddenly unbearable: still more so the thought of certain phrases in the letter that heralded his coming and those egregious lines in the book. At thought of them, there flowed through him wave on wave of red-hot discomfiture and rage. Barely had he left the Great Sanctuary, and here was life—insistent, merciless life—testing to the uttermost his hill-top philosophy and high resolve. No question, now, of going to Murree. Though his heart clung obstinately to the shred of hope that remained, he could not risk arriving merely to be confronted by those two in the first flush of their happiness. It was distracting. It was incredible. Nevertheless, it was quite conceivably true: while he, in a moment of exalted conviction, had bound himself to the wheel.

Instinctively he turned his steps towards the river; for it was the hour of evening worship and the great curved *ghats*, with their endless steps leading down to the water, were thronged with silent worshippers; mainly women and holy men fresh from Kedarnath. On the lowest step, a priest in orange robes was waving over the river some sacred brazen implement that gleamed like a miniature tree of flame: and, as Vincent drew near, that impressive silence gave place to a rhythmic outburst of chanting—stately, triumphant, rich in the weird half-tones and minor cadences of eastern music; choir on choir, answering each other in strophe and antistrophe, till the whole multitude arose and sang the praises of the Ganges, giver of life

and purity, sacred throughout the whole mighty course of her from the hills to sea.

The music, the inexpressible peace and beauty of the scene, were like caressing hands laid on Vincent's responsive spirit. Stronger than ever, the temptation assailed him to snap the cord of his resolve and go straight back to isolation and peace.

But the true Vincent was not so made; and as the tumult within subsided, the strength of that fair-sounding temptation subsided also. What comradeship with the mountains could he claim whose high resolve had gone to pieces under the first adverse blow of Fate? And what of his adopted *guru*, Sir Thakur Das, who had urged him to accept the discipline of life? What of his mother, and her, to whom he had written such brave words?

Though the modern dread of pain was strong in him, there were other elements stronger still. If suffering were inescapable, he could survive it: but no man worth his salt could survive the shattering of his own self-respect. That was the true conclusion of the whole matter; and cruelly chastened in spirit, yet unshaken in purpose, he returned to his tent.

Later in the evening he wrote a few lines of explanation to Thea: lines that explained nothing except the fact of his unfortunate inability to manage the flying trip to Murree proposed in his first letter.

"I console myself," he went on stoically, "with the reflection that the disappointment is mine rather than yours: since you have now so much to absorb and interest you on the spot. And anyway, I can feel sure I have your approval, even though I shall not get it by word of mouth." He paused; then found courage to add: "The dance you are so keen about is sure to be an immense success. But I don't for a moment suppose Howard will allow you to sit out dances with my very undeserving ghost. My letter from Kedarnath will, I hope, atone for the long silence of yours very sincerely,

VINCENT LEIGH."

In that same letter he had even been fool enough to omit the 'very sincerely,' and could now only hope she would see nothing in this beyond the conventional curtailment, which was not at all what he had intended at the time. To Miss Williams' dagger-thrust he vouchsafed no answer. So far as he could see—which was not very far—the girl had no reason for deceiving him; and although she was a notorious gossip, her statement, on the face of it, was more than likely to be true. It sufficed, being what she was, to keep him away from Murree; but it could not utterly extinguish hope.

Meanwhile, life on the Samana ridge would have a certain stern and bracing quality consonant with his renewed resolve to play the man; and for talisman he hid in his heart the parting words of Sir Thakur Das: "Whether we meet again or no, there will be communion between us always. As for you, my friend, go forward untroubled. 'Holding loss and gain as one—prepare for battle!'"

CHAPTER IV.

"Shy as the squirrel that leaps among the pine-tops,
Wayward as the swallow overhead at set of sun,
She whom I love is hard to catch and conquer,
Hard—but oh, the glory of the winning, were she won!"
—GEORGE MEREDITH.

AND what of Thea herself, with one lover so backward that he seemed no lover at all, and the other knocking persistently, at the half-open door of her heart.

In justice to the Mungoose, it must be admitted that her conviction in the matter of a private engagement was sufficiently near the mark to be shared by others of the match-making persuasion. The season had been unusually successful. Murree had excelled herself in gaiety and in love affairs, not to mention a few minor scandals; and it needed only the engagement of her acknowledged beauty to satisfy the most inveterate dabbler in other peoples' affairs. So far Murree was agreed that she had played the part of *Burra Mem* with wonderful ease and grace. She had done more than her duty in the way of picnics and dinners, and in providing—quite unintentionally—material for much interested speculation. To begin with, there was Captain Markham, always about with her; and it is admittedly the whole duty of an A.D.C. to fall in love with the General's daughter. Unfortunately, Markham's devotion to Miss Desmond betrayed no symptoms of the incipient lover, and there could be but one conclusion. He had already been refused and had taken his heart-break like a man. Thanks to the

Mungoose, Thea had soon stumbled on this interesting discovery, which she shared with the rejected one to their mutual enjoyment.

But Markham was very soon eclipsed altogether by a rising young Deputy Commissioner; a rather formidable being, who took himself and his work very seriously; and Thea had her mother's fatal gift of inducing men to talk about their work—a gift that should be labelled 'for plain women only.' The Formidable Being, impressed by her intelligent questions, slowly proceeded to unbend. People met him more and more often at the General's dinner-table, and even at informal picnics. He did not dance; but it was discovered that he occasionally sat out—with Miss Desmond. Then Lisa contrived to meet them out riding in the twilight on a rather narrow road; and the thing was reckoned as good as done.

It was at this point that Howard appeared on the scene, and lost no time in upsetting all their neat calculations and conclusions. Speculation buzzed afresh. Was he an interloper, spoiling sport, or was he the real thing? The Mungoose, hailing from Kohat, enjoyed passing importance as an authority on the new development. Needless to say she made the most of it. Her whole bearing implied that she could an if she would; but as a friend of Miss Desmond's her lips were sealed. She managed, nevertheless, by some occult process known to her kind, to convey a distinct impression that Miss Desmond was a shocking coquette, and was fast developing into the sort of girl men flirted with to any extent, but wisely refrained from marrying.

Meanwhile, it looked very much as if both the men concerned would give all they were worth to commit that crowning folly. But to the right-minded—which is to say mothers of marriageable daughters—it was incredible that Sir Theo Desmond should permit a mere Indian Army subaltern to shoulder a really promising "heaven-born" out of the field. The said subaltern, however, soon gave proof that he was a

man to be reckoned with: while Sir Theo himself seemed placidly unaware that his pretty, headstrong daughter was setting a deplorable example to less privileged damsels, trained to treat their civilians seriously and their subalterns as negligible quantities. And what *would* poor Lady Desmond say when she came out?—the right-minded asked each other with doleful emphasis. Men were stone blind about such things. Really, *someone* ought to speak to Sir Theo—tactfully, of course. But when it came to the point, there seemed to be no one whose tact was equal to the occasion.

And while feminine wisdom was hesitating to thrust in its oar, that egregious subaltern had already decided to tackle the General on the first favourable opportunity. A civilian rival did not seriously alarm him. He knew his Thea too well. He knew also, by this time, that his own success hung largely on propitiating Sir Theo in advance. He was at once more modest and more confident than he had been in those first intoxicating days of discovery: but the cock-sure attitude was gone. Certain recollections of earlier affairs began to worry him surprisingly; and it was 'thundering bad luck' that the Desmonds had been in Simla during the Larkin obsession two years ago. So far as he was concerned, it might have been ten years. He heartily wished it was. In fact he heartily wished he had a cleaner slate all round. Hitherto he had regarded such little episodes as mere matters of course, which in no wise concerned that rather improbable being, his future wife; and had accepted, quite complacently, his reputation as a dangerous trifler with maidenly affections. But now complacency was far from him. The General, though reputed a man of lenient judgment, might not be disposed to extend that leniency towards a prospective son-in-law; and it had needed very few days to convince him that the winning of Miss Desmond involved the ridiculously old-fashioned prelude of securing her father's approval.

As for the girl herself, Thea of the blue bungalow and Thea, mistress of her father's house, were, so to speak, different versions of the same original. He had arrived fully expecting to pick up the threads of their relation precisely where they had dropped at Kohat. But here, he found her hedged about with men and countless engagements: and though she had greeted him, as of old, with bright eyes and brighter cheeks, she seemed to have drifted tantalizingly out of reach. All of which was a trifle discouraging, even for a man little given to discouragement. Not that it availed to shake his purpose. It merely convinced him that Sir Theo must be the first point of attack: and his opportunity came at last, as such things do come, unexpectedly and unsought.

Having promised to lend Thea a certain book, he brought it himself on the chance of finding her disengaged. Instead, he came upon the General, alone in the verandah, with his pipe and his mail letters; accepted the offer of a drink and a cheroot; took his time over lighting up; then plunged boldly into the one subject on earth.

He found the ordeal even more trying than he had thought possible; and Sir Theo, it must be admitted, showed small disposition to help him out. He received Howard's announcement with a half smile that implied knowledge of the main theme. Evidently Miss Desmond had told him everything. To the rest he listened silently, with deep, deliberate pulls at his pipe; and increasingly Howard realised that this prolonged silence implied no worldly-wise scruples, but the very doubts which he had feared might stand in his light. Being the man he was, he did not lack courage to speak frankly on this matter also, difficult though he found it: how difficult, could be judged by his slight change of manner and the restless movement of his walking-stick along a crack between the verandah boards.

"I suppose, sir, you're thinking that a chap like myself—I've rotted round a good deal, I admit—isn't

fit to tie her shoe-strings. But there's no wiping the slate clean, worse luck. And when a fellow's dead in love with her—what's to be done?"

That desperate question brought Sir Theo's gaze from the unearthly purity of the snows to the troubled human face beside him.

"Marry her, I presume. If she's willing!" he remarked with a twinkle of amusement.

The crack was being furiously exploited now. "She wasn't, when I asked her in January. You know that, sir."

"Have you any reason to think she has changed her mind?"

"Precious little. Women do though, sometimes, once they know a man cares. What I want is a fair chance to try and bring her my way—if you can trust me, in spite of——"

"Mrs Larkin?" Desmond suggested very quietly; and Howard's ferrule made a vicious dig between the boards.

"I give you my word, sir, that affair—not that I'm defending it—was touched up more than a little by the immaculate Simla crew——"

"So my wife charitably supposed."

Howard let out a breath of relief. "Lady Desmond's a trump. She's one of the few good women I know who'd always make allowances—for the other sort."

Sir Theo said nothing; and Howard was silent a moment. Then: "O Lord," he sighed, "I suppose every decent chap wishes he had a whiter record when it comes to—this kind of thing."

Desmond regarded him thoughtfully. He liked the man's courage and candour, but on the whole he hoped Thea had not changed her mind since January.

"I think, in these days," he said, "we men are gradually beginning to realise that the woman we marry has a claim on more than a tithe of ourselves and our lives. We may even, in time, breed a race of men decent-minded enough to keep their records

whiter, not only in view of a possible wife, but for their own satisfaction."

At that Howard looked up suddenly. "Are you telling me, in polite terms, sir, that I can go to blazes? If you're dead against me, I'll go straight back to the shooting. Though I'd feel a damned sight more like shooting myself."

The older man smiled gravely. "No fear. You've too much grit. And I'm not dismissing you. I shall say nothing to the child. She must decide for herself. My sole consideration is her happiness. Are you in a desperate hurry to try your luck again?"

"In a way—yes. But I'm not keen on risking a second refusal. I want to see a bit more of her first, if I may. She—she rides with other fellows. Would you object to her riding with me—now you know?"

"Not at all: within reason. I don't believe in finicky restrictions. But with her mother at home, well—one doesn't want to give an impression that she's quite on the loose. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go ahead, then."

"Won't you wish me luck?"

"Not I! It's still too early days for me to wish any man luck in that particular enterprise. In any case, I should stipulate for a long engagement. A year or two. Are you prepared to put up with waiting?"

"I'm prepared to put up with anything, so long as I'm sure of her in the end. Though, if I could have my way, I'd marry her next week."

"Well said!" Sir Theo's tone was kindlier than it had been yet. "And if I could have *my* way not a man of you all should claim her for another five years! Ah, here they come."

There was a rattle of hoofs on the path leading up to the bungalow, followed by a scampering sound that soon brought Thea into view; her cheeks glowing, wisps of hair floating out from under her brown terai hat with its gold-tipped puggree.

"Not very late, are we, Dads?" she cried. Then,

catching sight of Howard, drew herself up and bowed with an engaging air of dignity. "How nice of you to turn up and keep him company."

Howard's answer was prompt and diplomatic. "Quite the contrary. Jolly good luck for me, finding him alone."

Both men had risen; but, as on an earlier occasion, it was Desmond who lifted her out of the saddle, and furthermore aggravated the offence by kissing her afterwards.

Very soon Captain Markham and a lively young Gunner appeared on the scene. The Gunner, it transpired, had been invited to dinner, and Desmond palliated his conduct by bidding Howard "come along with him," as they hailed from the same hotel.

An hour later they reappeared with commendable punctuality, and were greeted by a slender edition of Lady Desmond, in ivory and gold; very dignified but very gracious withal.

"Five of you—and not a glimmer of a woman!" she apologised with appealing brows. "It's not Captain Markham's fault, truly. It's because father and I *will* act on our irresistible impulses!"

"The truth is," Howard explained in her ear, as he took his seat by her at the table, "you're both too good-hearted to resist asking any poor devil, when you know he's dying for an invite."

"Did father know you were dying?" she asked, sprinkling her soup with grated cheese. Desmond and his private secretary were capping stories.

"I imagine he was clever enough to guess."

"And he saved your life by an invitation?"

"That still remains to be seen."

His tone, more than the words, brought a light flush to her cheeks. "Please behave," she said under her breath. "It's not fair—at the table."

"I'm awfully sorry. Forgive my rotten manners."

She bowed in mute assent, and turned with par-

ticular graciousness to the Gunner — a new acquisition, quite hopefully unsentimental and unlikely to explode.

After dinner there was a little music, followed by bridge. Howard, a keen player, was curiously ready to cut out after the first rubber, whereby he secured half an hour alone with Thea in her serenest mood. Nevertheless, she kept him steadily to the subject of shikar, without allowing him to feel her hand on the reins. The balance of power was not so markedly on his side as it had been at Kohat.

But when distant sounds threatened an invasion of card-players, he said quickly, urgently: "Ride with me to-morrow. Will you?"

She shook her head. "Sorry — I can't. I'm engaged."

"The heaven-born?"

"Yes."

"Look here—*are* you going to marry him?"

Her cheeks flamed. "That's for him to ask me, isn't it?"

"But it's for you to answer."

"*When* I'm asked!"

"Hang it all, those chaps'll be here in a minute. May I come Wednesday? Or is there a candidate for every day in the week?"

At that she looked deliberately into his eyes, and knew that she could hold him in leash only while he chose to permit it. "I call that rather ungracious. After all, there are three men in the house, besides the others. I think Wednesday will be all right. But don't come in a cantankerous mood; or I may suddenly find it's all wrong!"

But, as the door opened she vouchsafed him a smile that annulled the effect of her threat, and sent him home in a state of unreasoning exaltation. Sir Theo was a trump, and his daughter a jewel beyond price. There were still three clear weeks ahead of him; and what might not a man of resource and resolution achieve in three weeks?

Yet days that seemed wealth unlimited, in anticipation, resolved themselves, after all, into the few and brief hours which she and her faithful watch-dogs permitted him to spend alone with her. Two picnics, three or four rides, a couple of dances, an occasional dinner—and lo, one morning he awoke to the realisation that here was the 25th of June; and on July the 1st he was due at Fort Lockhart.

In that brief interval, what of his fate? Was he any more certain of her now than he had been a fortnight ago? One thing he could swear to. She was no coquette, as he had half suspected in earlier days. Her butterfly moods sprang from pure childish perversity; and they were rarer now than they had been at Kohat. This new Thea was subject to spells of dreamy seriousness that lightly veiled her radiance; and it was at these moments that his hope rode highest. By thinking of her and for her, by enveloping her in an atmosphere of unspoken devotion, he counted on making himself more or less indispensable to her happiness. But the lean diet of hope and belief could sustain him no longer. He wanted to know.

They were giving a small dance at the General's on the 27th. He had insisted, not without difficulty, on 'advance booking'; but his modest request for half her programme had been mildly dismissed for amendment. "Not more than four to one partner, from a hostess, out of sixteen dances," had been her unshakeable decree. But he had bracketed two out of the four: the last on the card. He would get her away into the garden; and if she had a glimmer of tenderness for him, he would win her then.

The night of the 27th was breathlessly still; heavy with the threat of an overdue monsoon; brilliant with the astonishing splendour of Indian starlight. Howard arrived late. The room was crowded; the first valse in full swing: but he sighted her almost at once, and she waved him a greeting as she circled past on Sir Theo's arm. Continually the iridescent

quality of her beauty surprised him afresh. Continually, in his enamoured eyes, she seemed to surpass herself; and never more so than to-night. Her dress, a sheeny golden affair, was new to him; and Howard had an eye for such things. It was the one touch of the woman in him. He noted, with keen approval, the rope of small, well-ripened amber beads, the orange-creamy roses at her breast and in her hair. He suspected, rightly, that Lady Desmond had had the designing of that gown. Indefinably, it made her seem more of a woman; and it was the woman he wanted to-night.

But when it was his turn to claim her, he found her—in spite of her stately gown—in the birthday-party mood of a happy child; a mood that recalled Pipette days, and gave him the same desperate sense of trying to grasp a butterfly.

During their first dance he bore with it, hoping it would pass as the evening wore on. And after all, her elation was natural enough. This, she told him, was her first ambitious attempt at entertaining. She and Captain Markham had been given a free hand, which meant that she had done exactly as she pleased, with three untiring men and a host of servants to carry out her complicated designs, and a brand-new dress from Home to crown all. He was called on to admire the embroidery—Lady Desmond's handiwork; to approve her scheme of decorations, her choice of valses, and the comfortable corner she had arranged for the 'poor chaperones.' She had evidently flung herself into it all with the zest of a genuine Desmond.

"And the people *do* seem to be enjoying themselves, don't they? No lounging men. No girls sitting out. Even the chaperones quite chirpy. I simply love seeing lots of people happy and feeling I've done it!"

They were in the verandah now; and the music struck up as she spoke. Howard, rising briskly, offered her his arm; then stood still a moment

looking down at her. "I wouldn't mind betting," he said slowly, "that you yourself are the happiest of the lot."

The note of reproach in his tone softened her to instant seriousness.

"Would I be very dreadful if I said 'I believe you're right'? And wouldn't I be the most ungrateful fiend if I wasn't happy with all this—" she waved an explanatory hand—"and every one so good to me; and oh, just the grand adventure of being alive, and loving it all—music and dancing and riding, the stars and the flowers, and waking up in the morning, and caring for people and trying to understand them. And now, to-night—" she paused, more from lack of breath than lack of matter, and glanced up at his half-seen face that had grown so much graver of late. "Aren't *you* one of 'the lot' that are enjoying my first own party?"

"Yes: when I happen to be dancing with you. But the fact that I'm due at Fort Lockhart in four days rather takes the shine out of it for me."

"Four days! I hadn't realised."—Was it pure imagination, or did her finger-tips lightly press his sleeve?—"The month's gone in a flash. But isn't it rather a pity to spoil things—for us both, by being miserable now, because you're going to be miserable in four days' time?"

He paused on the threshold of the ball-room and looked down at her. "I suppose that's sound philosophy," he said.

"I don't know much about philosophies. I should call it common-sense. But I'm sorry—if I seemed unkind and forgetting——"

"Oh, I know that. You're so confoundedly sympathetic."

She glanced up in dismay. "Are you angry?"

"Of course not. I'm only a selfish beast who has no earthly right to spoil your pleasure."

"I say, Howard, that's not playing the game." Markham hurried up to them; and Howard with a

muttered apology, strolled out into the garden and lit a cigarette.

His prick of remorse had been genuine enough: but when he could join her again he noted, with unashamed satisfaction, that his remarks had not altogether failed of their effect. In her smiling eyes lurked the shadow of seriousness that he loved. But the change might simply be due to the sympathy he had so rudely confounded. A man could never be sure. How sure he had felt last January he did not care to remember now.

In the interval that followed, he danced mechanically with animated things in petticoats. He also discovered, for the first time, how surprisingly idiotic a crowd of twirling, bobbing, grimacing men and women can appear to an observer out of tune with the spirit of their proceedings; and as he did not enjoy the sensation, his partners had little pleasure in his company.

Lisa Williams, on whom he had bestowed a duty dance, found him quite unresponsive to skilfully baited fishings for confidences. But her shrewd eyes were on him when he offered his arm to Miss Desmond, at No. 15; and she decided that an unofficial announcement, though perhaps premature, would be a safe venture, while ensuring her the triumph of being first in the field. There were further reflections that mainly concerned herself and Mr Leigh. As for those two, if they were not engaged they ought to be. That was her righteous conclusion: and for once Howard would have agreed with her.

They danced through No. 15 without a break; and during those few intoxicating moments he could not choose but believe her one with him in all things, for all time. Then it was over; and, still silent, he led her into the verandah, down the steps and out on to the garden path, faintly illumined now by a waning moon.

"That was perfect, wasn't it?" she said at last, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

His only answer was a faint pressure of her fingers against his side; and still he led her on—a curiously subdued and unprotesting Thea—up the narrow path barred with black pine shadows. Then: "We are not going back in there again," he announced quietly. "We've had enough dancing for to-night."

"Speak for yourself!" she said with a little nervous laugh.

"That's precisely what I've brought you out here for. There's a seat, isn't there, at the bend?—Ah, here we are."

It was a seat of rough pine logs backed by a deodar, whose out-flung boughs seemed the very wings of night stamped in ink on the splendour of the sky.

Thea, slipping her hand from his arm, went across to the railings and stood there looking out over black, pine-crested ridges and bottomless gulfs of darkness to the far faint shimmer of the snows. The man followed and stood beside her: but for him, at that moment, there were neither stars, nor moon, nor snows. There was only the vision of her illumined face and her small hands that gripped the top rail as if she had need to control some strong disturbance within. All her childish excitement had evaporated; and Howard believed he had chosen his hour well.

He set his teeth to steady himself; then, very lightly, he touched her shoulder. "Thea," he said, and she started visibly. "Are you really thinking about the snows?"

"No," she answered, without removing her eyes from them.

"I thought as much." The vibration in his voice shamed those inadequate words. "I've been patient enough, haven't I? Tell me, honestly—I'm sick of uncertainty—*are* you sorry I'm going down this week?"

"Y-yes."

"Sorry enough, by any chance, to give me the

promise I've been hoping and praying for all these months?"

Her distress was evident. He could see the rise and fall of the roses at her breast.

"Must it really be—now?"

"Yes. It *must*." He spoke with sudden imperiousness. "Heaven knows I've given you time enough. If you're not certain now—you never will be; and it would be more merciful to put a bullet through me, than to keep me on thorns any longer."

No answer this time; and leaning nearer he lowered his voice. "Thea . . . I could make you certain in five minutes, if you'd only let me kiss you . . . once."

He was so close now that it seemed as if he did not mean to wait for permission. He did wait, nevertheless. But as she mutely edged away from him, he slipped an arm round her and took possession of her hands.

"Darling little girl," he whispered passionately. "It *can't* be 'No' to-night. I'm crazily in love with you. What I felt at Kohat was nothing to what I feel now. And lately you've almost seemed to care. You don't hate it—do you—my holding you like this?"

Still no answer. Only the far-off strains of a valse came up to them through the darkness. A shivering tremor ran through her. He felt her yield to the pressure of his arm and cautiously tightened his hold.

"O-oh!" she breathed; and again "O-oh!"

The hour and the man and her own very mixed emotions prevailed. When he spoke so and held her so, resistance was beyond her: and with a sigh of sheer relief she leaned her cheek against his coat.

As for Howard, even in that moment of exaltation, he had just enough of wisdom and control to refrain from crushing her against him. He could feel her heart leaping under his hand like the heart of a captured bird; and like a bird she must be gentled into a sense of security. But the temptation to kiss

her overmastered him; and the instant she felt his breath on her hair she sprang free of him with a low cry of protest. "Oh, please—not yet! We've not really settled—anything."

Howard, jerked rudely out of Paradise, had some ado to keep his temper.

"By the Lord, you'll drive me mad!" he said with repressed passion; and recapturing her hands he drew her towards the seat under the deodar. "It was only natural—wasn't it?—I should take your very eloquent silence for consent?"

"Yes—yes. Forgive me——"

"With all my heart—if you'll only do the same again." He sat down and drew her close to him. "See here, you distracting and adorable bit of quicksilver, we've got to fix up something to-night. You *do* care in your heart. I'm sure of it—now. But you're afraid I'll be in a hurry to snatch you away from that precious father of yours. Isn't that somewhere about the truth?"

"Yes. I think—it is. But . . . I could talk better, honestly, if you'd let me have my hands."

He released them at once; and, as if to reward him, she laid one lightly on his arm. "Truly I do care, in a sort of way. But I'm still afraid—like I was at Kohat—that it's . . . not the right kind of caring."

He promptly covered her hand with his own. "Seems *I* can't talk unless I've got one of them!" he explained with a rather unsteady smile. "Why worry yourself and torment me with that eternal hair-splitting? I tell you, Thea, I've come to such a pass that I'd rather have the wrong kind of caring from you than the right kind—whatever it may be—from any other woman. That's plain enough, isn't it? Now then—will you marry me?"

"I believe . . . I will. But oh, please—please give me a chance to think things out calmly. Just to-night."

"And send me a polite little note in the morning, 'Declined with thanks'? Hesitating's a rotten poor

game. You've had scores and scores of nights to think things out since January. And I've spoken to your father—if that's any help."

"Father! He never told me."

"No. He said you must decide for yourself. Only he wants a long engagement. I said I'd wait two years—if I must."

"Oh, how good of you!" Her relief was a trifle too obvious. "That *would* make a difference. I know it sounds horrid. But . . . you do understand?"

"I try to, anyway," he said with a short laugh. "I'd even put up with a private engagement for a month or two, so that you could take me on trial, so to speak. But I want my answer now." His fingers tightened on her hand. "Thea—you're mine. You know you are."

Her sigh was a mere outlet of pent-up feeling that revealed nothing. "Perhaps—I am. I can't feel sanely or safely sure of anything in this moonlight. And—it's for always. That's what frightens me. Mother warned me long ago, 'Never accept a man at a dance.' I remember she quoted some verse of Mrs Browning's about 'Colours seen by candle-light'——"

"Oh, rot! *My* colours 'll stand the daylight test, as you very well know."

"Yes—yes. I'm not doubting *you*. But dancing and music have such a queer effect on me; and to-night, . . . I told you, everything's sort of gone to my head. There—listen!" She sprang swiftly to her feet. "They're playing 'The Queen.' I *must* be on the spot to say good-bye to people. It would vex father so. And—oh, you can't hustle these things. I'll send a note, soon as I'm properly awake. Promise."

With a great sigh he rose and stood beside her. "Very well. If you insist. Anyway—you believe it will be 'Yes'?"

"Oh, I hope so. I can't bear hurting you. That's

been the trouble all along. But it must be the truth. Mustn't it?"

"Yes. It must be the truth."

Without another word they hurried down the steep little path to the house: and Thea, as they went, had a dreamlike feeling that she was running away from herself.

CHAPTER V.

"'Some one asked me, 'What are the feelings of a lover?' I replied, 'When you are a lover you will know.'"—*Sankaracharya.*

THOUGH that one night had been given her to think things out calmly, Thea spent what little remained of it in dreamless sleep. But the importunate spirit of Howard tugging at her heart, woke her unreasonably early, with the sound of his voice in her ears. "Thea—you're mine. You know you are!"

Very nearly she had known it last night: and if she did not know it now, there would be an end of everything—of his letters, his devotion, his insistence that at once thrilled and unnerved her. No question of friendship with such as he: in any case there seemed an odd lack of mental intimacy, considering how much they were together and the capacities of his many-sided brain. That might be because, just now, the whole man was concentrated on a single purpose. The power of that purpose and the depth of his devotion had been overwhelmingly brought home to her last night: and for a while she lay with closed eyes, realising that her feeling for him did, in a measure, bear the daylight test; realising also, not without shame, that, in the moment when she sprang away from him, she had half wanted him to kiss her, even while she shrank from irrevocable surrender.

Was this, then, the love that poets sang of—the love that had glorified the marriage of her Two—this perverse, perturbing mixture of joy and dread, of longing

and shrinking? If any one could solve that puzzle it was her father: and the fact that she could not put it to him, simply and naturally, was proof in itself that Nature and impatient young men were already robbing him of his child. Yet was she still too young to know how instinctively the heart of a woman responds to the desire of the man: or to realise that her own response to Howard's forceful wooing had in it more of nascent passion than of love? She only knew that she had once felt a finer thrill and shy intimations of a love untainted by fear. But these things she had deliberately put away from her. It was so evident that 'he' had no thought beyond friendship; and her maidenly pride still shirked the admission that Howard's was not the only spirit tugging at her heart.

But Howard tugged also at her conscience; and she had been reared to respect the promptings of that still small voice. For months she had kept him on thorns of indecision: for weeks she had implicitly encouraged his persistent hope: to what end? That she loved him, after a fashion, was certain: that she might come to love him a great deal more, in the course of their engagement, was probable; to say the least of it. His soldierly directness and force of character gave him a surface likeness to her father, which had attracted her from the first: and she, being an idealist in the grain, read into him a deeper resemblance, which was not there. By the same token, she mistook his talent and general capacity for intellect; his virility and courage for a guarantee of the inward and spiritual grace that made Desmond the man he was. Finally—it always came back to that—she could not bear to hurt him so: and the memory of last night made it harder than ever.

She pictured him waiting for her answer; and knew now that it must be 'Yes'; that, in fact, she had said 'Yes' implicitly a dozen times during the past few weeks. After all, he was a splendid sort of man. There was no littleness in him; and his love was so

real that at least he deserved she should give him every chance; him—and herself also.

To clinch her decision, she sprang out of bed, sat down to her writing-table and wrote—briefly, impulsively—

"You were right last night. I believe I really am yours. Come quickly and make me feel quite, quite sure of it. THEA."

"There! I've done it," she murmured; and again, as last night, her dominant feeling was a blessed sense of relief.

When the door opened to admit the ayah, with early tea and letters, she sprang guiltily to her feet; and Miriam Bibi, devoted and privileged, wagged a playful finger at her charge.

"*Hai, hai, Missy Sahib!* General Sahib tole plenty sleep; and see—little lady writing letters before poor ayah comes."

Thea set her hands palm to palm. "Only one tiny letter, ay-wi. Very important." And picking up an envelope she skipped back into bed. "I hope you've brought me plenty to read——"

She broke off short. For there were three envelopes on the tray; one—a phenomenally thick one—in a handwriting she had not seen for weeks. At sight of it her heart gave a great leap, and she tore it open with shaking fingers. Howard was forgotten. The ayah was forgotten; seeing which, she vanished, leaving the little lady alone with her very much awakened heart.

Page after close-written page she devoured eagerly: descriptions, terse and vivid, interspersed with snatches of philosophic reflection and a masterly pen-portrait of Sir Thakur Das: then the tale of that wonderful night at Kedarnath; the rush of the pilgrims; the moonlight walk to the precipice; the suicide of the devotee; and, more absorbing than all, his own inspiration, temptation, and final decision.

Thea, propped against her pillows, read and re-read every word of that absorbing, self-revealing letter, while her tea grew cold, and that finer thrill—which Howard's wooing so curiously failed to produce—stirred afresh in her veins.

And she fought against it no longer. There was no need to fight against it any more. Every word he had written seemed to be telling her that; and the words he had refrained from writing told her more plainly still. In her present mood of quickened sensibility, she could not fail to read between the lines. One paragraph especially she read many times over: for her heart told her it was a veiled confession, no less.

"Forgive me if I seem presumptuous," it ran; "but something tells me that it does matter to you—a little—whether I let my wretched disabilities get the better of me or the reverse. There were things you said at Kohat—things a man doesn't easily forget. And that night in the moonlight, when it came to the real tug, I was vaguely aware of some presence—could it have been yours, I wonder?—urging me to take the way of courage. Well, I am going to take it. Are you even a little glad? You remember that question in your letter to Simla, Had I really found any big truth, or was I only running away from things? It made me almost angry, for the moment, because I knew quite well that I was chiefly running away! But now I can honestly say I have found truths, big enough to affect my whole life, thanks to these wonderful mountains and this strange new friend of mine, and not least—thanks to you."

Would he, could he, being what he was, have written so to any one else on earth? Taken in conjunction with certain unforgotten things, this letter of his, so unlike the others in tone, could have but one meaning. He cared; he had always cared: and now, having conquered those troublesome disabilities of his, he felt free to let her know the truth. Things that had seemed puzzling and disappointing became

suddenly clear as day in the light of this letter with its brief, significant ending: "Yours, Vincent Leigh."

And he was coming soon. He might be here to-morrow. His wonderful letter was but a herald of things more wonderful still.

The door opened again and Miriam reappeared. "Parcel for Missy Sahib," she began; then broke into distressful exclamations. "*Hai, hai, piyari!*[1] That kind letter no good. Little lady first drink tea; then ayah give parcel."

Little lady, far too happy to rebel, obediently gulped down tea and toast, and received for reward her parcel. Vincent's handwriting again! The blood flew to her cheeks. Head and heart were in a whirl. How could she possibly confront her too-discerning father in less than an hour?

"Ayah send word to General Sahib," she said. "Missy Sahib woke too early, and taking breakfast in bed, for little more sleep."

Then, being alone again, she opened her new treasure, and on the fly-leaf read those astonishing lines, hardly able to believe that they were addressed to herself. It was so utterly unexpected and yet—so like him. With all his shyness and oddness, he was rather an ideal sort of lover. One didn't expect lines of poetry in these days.

Very tenderly she pressed the open page against her cheek; then lay back on her pillows again in a trance of happiness—the unalloyed happiness of anticipation. Here was no perturbing mixture of joy and dread, but a swift glad response of her whole being that left no room for a shadow of indecision.

The contrast brought with it a sharp reminder of Howard, temporarily forgotten; Howard waiting and looking for her summons: and a chill ran through her at the thought that if Vincent's letter had been delayed till the evening *dák*, it would have come too late. With a little shiver, she faced the fact that Vincent's good fortune spelt tragedy, or something near it, for

[1] Darling.

the man who had pleaded with her so passionately last night. She drew from under her pillow the note she had so incredibly written, less than half an hour ago, under the influence of a compelling emotion, that was certainly not love. The wording of that note was proof conclusive. She did not require Vincent's presence to make her entirely sure that she was his, whenever it pleased him to claim her.

But first she must find plain, unequivocal words, in which to tell her lover of last night that doubt and indecision were altogether at an end. She, who had almost been driven into his arms by sheer reluctance to hurt him, must now hurt him so sharply that hope would die an instantaneous death. It was her punishment; and she accepted it as such. She must make things cruelly plain. But—how was it to be done?

Sentence after sentence she framed and discarded as too harsh. She felt so keenly the pain they would inflict. Imaginative sympathy, fine gift though it be, is a very real handicap in dealing with the tragic actualities of life: and Thea—as Howard had said—was 'confoundedly sympathetic.' Finally, she sprang out of bed, for the second time, slipped on her crane kimono, and sat down resolved to write, simply and naturally, whatever words came into her head.

For a few seconds she sought inspiration from the sunlit snows; then she took up her pen and wrote without hesitation or pause—

"Dear Mr Howard,—Please, *please* forgive me—though I don't deserve it. And please believe I've always been honest with you and tried to be honest with myself. You said last night it must be the truth, so I have to tell it now, though it hurts me horribly, and I'm afraid it will hurt you more. I don't know what came over me last night, except that I do care in a way, as I've said from the first. But this morning I know utterly and surely that it's not the right way, and it *never will be*. There *is* a

reason why I know this, but I can't explain it. So you must just believe, and oh, *not* try to see me again now. It would only make both of us miserable. You won't come if I beg you not to. I know that.

"I'm afraid it's no good to talk about being friends. You're not that sort, and anyway, there's been too much of the other thing. Only try to forgive

"Your penitent (and desperately ashamed of herself), THEA DESMOND."

The instant it was written she whisked it into an envelope; and when Miriam brought the breakfast-tray, she received orders to despatch that important *chit* by the hand of Red Rover's *sais*. She hoped that if there were an answer, it would be returned by the same hand. And she was not disappointed of her hope.

Miriam handed her the envelope with a confidential chuckle: for the compound knew what was toward as well as any matchmaker of them all. But the little lady's mood had changed. With a gesture, she dismissed her slave and opened Howard's note. It was simple and straightforward as her own, and it hurt her the more; even as hers had hurt him.

"THEA," he wrote, "yours this morning is pretty much what I expected after the way you sheered off last night. A good many would say it's pretty much what I deserve; which is no consolation, even if it's true. Your decision—and I accept it as final—has simply knocked the bottom out of things. I told your father once that if he sent me to the right-about I should feel like shooting myself; and he was good enough to assure me I had too much grit. Hope he was right. At present I can still hardly take it in. Naturally I'm puzzled. Sounds as if you'd fallen in love with another chap in your sleep. But unhappily that's no longer any affair of mine. Of course I won't try and see you. I shall go straight to the

Gullies, and thank God when my leave's up. No need to talk of forgiveness, you lovely and distracting child. I've too often been the sinner myself to sit in judgment. As for friendship — rather not. I'm your lover. And your lover I'll remain till I hear some other fellow has won you. Then I shall want to shoot him. Nice sort of chap—ain't I?

"Lord, how I've run on! And I meant to write half a dozen lines. But it's my last chance. Don't make yourself miserable on my account. I won't shoot myself. Promise.

"Always your lover,

"Lynn Howard."

But she did make herself miserable none the less. Overwrought by the swing and counter-swing of emotion, she lay crying quietly with closed eyes, puzzling over the perverse tangle of things, the inextricably mingled strands of pain and joy; but not for long.

She was young; ridiculously young. The sun was shining. And 'he' would be with her to-morrow. She longed to cancel all her engagements; but that would never do. For another twenty-four hours she must keep her own counsel and manage to announce her news as though it were merely a pleasant surprise, not a possible prelude to the supreme event of her life.

On the whole, she succeeded well enough to delude her father, whose relief at the dismissal of Howard made him the readier to welcome Vincent's appearance on the scene. Her natural distress over the rejected lover he charmed away, as he alone could do. Then, having established her on his knee, he asked casually: "Well, how goes the pilgrimage? Did you get a good account of it?"

"Yes, quite a long one." And, the better to avoid pitfalls, she enlarged on the wonderful scene at Kedarnath and the personality of Sir Thakur Das.

"The boy seems to have written you a remarkable

screed," was Desmond's disconcerting comment on matters that had been purposely set forth to divert him from the main point.

"Yes. He knows I've a weakness for details, and I suppose he wrote while his mind was full of it all—like after the Pir Panjál." She had shared that letter with him, and had read him extracts from others. But she showed no inclination to share this one, and he noted the fact with a pang of something very like jealousy: the worst possible sign. He had never felt jealous of Howard.

"We're all in league to spoil her, it seems," he said, smiling. "If she wants details she must have 'em! But I'm glad Vincent's made up his mind about the Army. It'll be the making of him. Very sporting to rattle all the way up here for a bare twenty-four hours."

"Yes. Very." One finger-tip was caressing the frosted hair on his temple. "I do believe several new white ones have arrived since Mother went home. If she finds out, she'll never forgive me."

"She won't find it out. They'll turn dark again now they know you're not going to marry Howard!" A short silence; then he drew her closer. "Is it a case of exit one lover, enter another—eh, darling?"

"I don't know," she answered, blushing furiously at the question and the mild untruth; the first she had ever told him. "Are you dead against them all?"

"H'm. I hope I'm not such a monster of selfishness. But I wouldn't object to an interregnum!"

"Beloved Dad!" she cried, and pressed a very warm cheek to his. "Have I been a horrid worry to him? Tell true."

"Worry? Lord, no. Only a bit of a responsibility. Now come out for a canter, and forget these eternal young men for an hour."

"Nothing I'd love better." She sprang lightly to her feet. "I wish we hadn't asked those superfluous people to lunch. Why *do* we?"

"Yes. Why do we?"

"I suppose because we're Generals and we've 'taken the habit.' Let's give it up from this day forward. We've done more than our duty by these Murree-*lōg*."

"I'm agreeable!"

"Shall we put off to-morrow's superfluities for a bold beginning?"

She flung out the suggestion with admirable lightness; but he caught the drift of her thought and countered it in the same vein. "Steady, the Buffs! You forget I'm a public character. But we'll be more discreet in future."

He noted, with approval, that she took her defeat well.

"Will we, I wonder—being us?" was all she said. She could cheerfully suffer any number of superfluities while that magical word to-morrow echoed in her heart like the refrain of a song. Only the thought of Howard's pain shadowed her blue horizon. All she asked, now, was one more day of sunshine to welcome that other: but a thick haze veiled the plains, and clouds were massing ominously in the south-west.

Desmond indicated them as they rode home. "We shan't escape the crash much longer. And God knows they need it down there, poor devils. We'll be in the thick of it by to-morrow night."

They were in the thick of it when Thea awoke next morning. Crash on crash, flash on flash stunned the ear and dazzled the eye. Clouds were hurled across the sky in magnificent confusion. Wooded hills seemed to rock and shudder at the onset; and all things living were battered by the steel rods of the rain, that smote upon the windows and played a devil's tattoo on the slate roof overhead.

For a while she simply lay listening to the music of that Olympian quartette—thunder and lightning, wind and rain—feeling herself a mere midge in the midst of it all. Then came the thought of a certain tonga battling up-hill in the teeth of this tornado, and instantly the majestic heavens were dwarfed to their right proportion in the scale of things. Rain and

wind became mere obstacles in his path. He would probably be soaked to the skin, and he might catch cold. It was a serious consideration; so serious, that she forgot all about it at sight of another letter from him on her tea-tray. Now she would know exactly when to expect him; and with a throb of anticipation she opened the constrained note written by a pained and dismayed Vincent at Hardwar.

It was a pained and dismayed Thea who lay reading it; deaf to the swirl of the storm; trying, and trying in vain, to discern between the lines some glimmer of yesterday's starry hope. Yet it had been there, vividly there, in the earlier letter and those wonderful lines in her book.

Which was she to believe?

Impetuous creature that she was, her real feelings, over-long denied, had already swept her half-way towards him; and now she felt like a horse checked in full gallop by a hand on the curb. Hurt to the point of rebellion, and all her Desmond pride up in arms, she thanked God he would never be likely to guess at the too ready response of the star to the fluttering of the moth.

Yet the conviction returned that he did care. Something had happened between the writing of these two letters; or else—was he fundamentally a sort of quicksand, unstable in action and emotion? That last she simply refused to believe; she preferred rather to hope that this very lame note had been written in a hurry, and that a later one would throw more light on his sudden change of plan.

Upheld by that hope she pulled herself together, and decided to give him time before taking a header into the Slough of Despond. Her unfailing humour, salted with a few grains of common-sense, saved her often from the snares common to a lively imagination and a too impulsive heart.

She must and she could announce her news without allowing her lynx-eyed father to suspect the shock it had given her. But oh, how she hated this new

atmosphere of reserves and half untruths that nowadays hung like a cloud between them. A year ago she had not known a pang or a joy unshared by him; and now she found herself a prey to hopes and fears that simply would not go into words. It was all the fault of those 'eternal young men'; and probably he felt it even more than she did herself. Poor darling! No wonder he wouldn't object to an interregnum. Well—he was going to have his wish after all; and she decided to congratulate him on the fact, just to prove how little she cared. Deception again!

Meanwhile that too impetuous heart of hers, more severely repressed than ever, would patiently wait and hope.

CHAPTER VI.

"If she will—she will, you may depend on't."
—SHAKESPEARE.

BUT, in this case, patience was not rewarded.

Days—drenching, mist-muffled days—mounted to a week, and there came no word from the Samana to solve the riddle of those contradictory letters. *Dák* followed barren *dák;* and the strain of waiting grew steadily harder to bear, as a load seems to grow heavier the longer it is carried. It was the Kohat situation over again, only more perplexing and more unendurable: the tentative yet unmistakable move forward and the sudden retreat.

His earlier silence she half understood. He wanted to test himself, to feel quite sure about the big things; and then there had been Mr Howard very much to the fore. There had also been the Mungoose. The conjunction of those two in her mind set her at last on the trail of the truth. Two puzzling phrases in his second letter became suddenly clear: 'Since you have now so much to absorb and interest you on the spot,' and again the suggestion that Mr Howard would not allow her to sit out dances with his ghost. Evidently, as before, Mr Howard was the stumbling-block: and whose fault was it but her own? Had not three several women lately asked her, in the strictest confidence, if they might congratulate her yet? Did he, of all people, believe they were engaged? She went hot all over at the thought. The

word 'allow' left little room for doubt, implying as it did that he knew, but could say nothing till he had the fact from herself. Clearly some one must have written; and there flashed the unerring conviction—that Mungoose! No doubt she pursued him with letters even in the wilds; and never was there a chattering busybody more certain to say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Here, surely, was the solution of her private riddle; and while it salved her pride, it involved her in a wretched tangle, the more difficult to unravel because it included a Vincent and a chastened Thea, who would not, if she could help it, go forward too fast again.

The distracting sense of being bound hand and foot roused her to a very unheroic and complicated state of wrath. The Mungoose, needless to say, was anathema from the tip of her intrusive nose to the Paris heels that made her walk like a hen. Worse still, she was half angry with Mr Howard for his persistence, with Mr Leigh for his lack of it; above all, with herself, for having encouraged the wrong man; partly from fascination, partly from an instinctive dread of inflicting pain, which she had now given in fuller measure, not only to Howard, but to Vincent Leigh. Happiness radiated from every line of that wonderful first letter. Then—her quick brain pictured it too vividly—the descent to Hardwar and the letters awaiting him: hers deliberately airy in tone, and the Mungoose creature's, with its tit-bit of gossip that had brought his air-castle toppling to the ground.

At the thought of it, her chivalrous spirit raged. Her own misery and perplexity seemed a mere nothing by comparison; and she suddenly realised, with a pang, that she had not yet answered either of his letters or even thanked him for the book with those haunting lines: confession, or renunciation—which? Absorbed in her own anxiety for a letter, she had simply forgotten that he might be looking for one too. Well, he should not be kept waiting a minute longer. At least she could write in her old friendly vein; and she did.

Shutting herself into her room, she proceeded to fill two large sheets with her friendliness, her high approval, her joy in possessing the book and those beautiful lines of which she felt utterly unworthy. "I mean it, truly I do," she added from her heart. "*You* are much nearer to the stars than I am. And I'm not something afar. I'm right in the middle of things and horribly human and foolish into the bargain. But I'm glad and proud you put them in my book; and I'm glad and proud you wrote me that letter—the finest one I ever had. It was very disappointing you couldn't manage to come up and tell us more about it all. Some day—perhaps? Yours very sincerely, Thea Desmond."

Howard's name was conspicuous by its absence; but goodness only knew how he might interpret that, if he happened to be in a black mood of reaction after the heights. If she could see him and speak to him the fog of misunderstanding would surely disperse itself. Meantime he must suffer, she must suffer, and everything must remain at a standstill.

In September she and her father were going home; and what chance was there now of seeing Vincent before they left? What hope of rectifying the muddle for which she herself was partially to blame? In the strict privacy of her heart she cursed that Mungoose as comprehensively as the Archbishop cursed the Jackdaw of Rheims.

Let those whom life has chastised with scorpions smile at this mosquito-bite of a tangled love affair. But the sorrows of the young have a poignancy all their own; and it was not the least part of Thea's unhappiness that she could not turn for counsel to the father who had been her shield and buckler from nursery days. There remained Phyllis, whom Desmond had skilfully induced to stay in Murree for a month, when Eden returned with Howard to Kohat. But this new feeling was, for Thea, a thing peculiarly hidden and sacred; and she had really so little to go upon from a practical point of view, that she could not

bring herself to speak of it—yet; though, in the last resort, Phyllis was the one person who might manage to enlighten Vincent without serious injury to maidenly pride.

Before very long she had an answer from him. Taking his cue from her, he wrote in his old manner, touched with a new constraint. But for certain treasured sheets locked away in her drawer, she might well have supposed that the Vincent of Kedarnath was a freak of her own imagination. She learnt, with a quiver of hope, that he was temporarily at Fort Lockhart with the Colonel and Howard, in whom he would perhaps notice a change that, in conjunction with her silence on the subject, might reveal the truth.

Meanwhile there was quite a definite interregnum, in which Phyllis and the children and the monsoon were a good deal to the fore. Then her father indulged in a sharp bout of fever. Nothing to matter, he told her. The damp had touched him up. But she could not bear him to be ill. He had been 'doing it' rather too often this last year; and as she was strictly forbidden to worry Mother on the subject, she worried more than a little herself. He shook it off this time quicker than usual; but they seemed less often alone together now. He had lately developed fits of silent pre-occupation; and though, at times, she caught him watching her with his old loving scrutiny, he said no more about those eternal young men. Howard's departure had eased his immediate anxiety; and, as the summer wore on, matters of larger, graver import claimed the undivided attention of his mind and heart. For, like scores of distinguished Anglo-Indians, he had given his devotion, as well as his life and untiring energy, to the great country of his service.

India may truly be said to rank with Italy as a woman-country, 'loved of male lands' and exercising the same irresistible magnetism, the same dominion over the hearts of men. But while Italy—daughter of the passionate South—is swift in response, lavish in giving, herself a lover of lovers, India, even to her inti-

mates, seems still a veiled mystery, aloof yet alluring, like one of her own purdah princesses. Like them, also, wherever allegiance has been given, she is faithful even to death; but her demand is for hard service and a life's devotion with no sure promise of return. For this cause, her appeal is irresistible to the chivalrous and the strong. For this cause, she has numbered among her lovers a Lawrence and a Broadfoot, a Curzon and a Roberts; not to mention a hundred stars of lesser magnitude,—equal at least in their record of strenuous service. Of these was Theo Desmond, idealist and practical soldier, and, as a lover of India, second to none. Hence his pre-occupied silences and the gathering cloud on his brow.

For now it was plain to all men of knowledge and experience that this year of Jubilee—celebrated at Home with flags and processions and cheering crowds—threatened to be a year of critical trouble for India. In every direction the seeing eye discerned an increasing simmer of irritation and unrest. Calcutta, at one end, was a hotbed of disaffection, sown broadcast by an unmuzzled press. At the other end, the Afghan Amir was insidiously engineering a holy war on account of certain cairns erected as Afghan boundary pillars by a plausible Viceroy, whose generous subsidy in no way deterred his Highness from encouraging the idea that those innocent-looking piles of stone were British boundary pillars in disguise.

Now the least hint of annexation is, to the Border tribes, as a red rag to a bull; and recent events in the Near East had unsettled the whole Mahomedan community from Afghanistan downward. The fact that the Sultan had defeated Greece and indulged, with impunity, in wholesale massacres of a Christian people, had sent a wave of conviction through India that the Star of Islam was rising at last. In cities and bazaars, inflammable spirits were busy inventing and circulating the wildest rumours; till men began asking each other—"Is not the hour ripe for the downfall of the British Raj?"

The hour, though not ripe, was far more critical than the mass of casual, confident Anglo-Indians cared to realise. But happily there were men among them too clear-eyed to encourage that comfortable self-deception, which is the stumbling-block of the whole race; men who foresaw that the simmer of unrest all along the Frontier would assuredly reach boiling-point before the summer was out. And foremost among these was Sir Theo Desmond. He knew the Border tribes as they only do whose knowledge includes a lurking sympathy with their pugnacity and savage love of independence. Furthermore, he had left on them—while commanding the Frontier Force—an indelible impress of justice, uprightness, and strength: an achievement likely to make him a very real asset in the hour of uncertainty. Not that Desmond ever dreamed of so regarding himself. But he knew to a nicety the value of his own special knowledge and prestige. Anything in the shape of Frontier trouble was very much his 'job'; and it is precisely in such moments of crisis that the soldier who has done more than his duty, and studied more than his bare profession, comes triumphantly into his own.

By now, the look of things made him feel so reluctant to leave the country that he began to think seriously of delaying his furlough to a more opportune moment. If the Frontier had need of him, he could easily hold out till next year; let the doctors say what they would. In March, after a bout of high fever, with complications, they had strongly advised immediate sick leave; but his interest in the whole situation was too keen; and he was apt to resent being badgered about his health.

And even while he debated, the matter was suddenly, startlingly, taken out of his hands.

Before the month was over, all India knew that the tribes on the North-East Frontier were up in earnest, led by a fanatic known as the Mad Mullah; one that claimed to be supported in his crusade by invisible

Hosts of Heaven. The text of his war-cry was the threatened annexation of Holy Swat, in the guise of a brief and necessary occupation. There was, undeniably, a small garrison perched on the Malakand Pass and an advanced post at Chakdara on the Swat river. These the Fakir, backed by unseen legions, undertook to sweep out of the country in a week, even if none raised an arm to help him: adding, with very worldly shrewdness, that those who gave no help would get no plunder. It was his trump card. Straightway there accrued to him hosts the reverse of heavenly: tens, hundreds, thousands of them, from Upper Swat, Buner, and Utman Khel. Villagers flew to arms. Border levies melted away, or made a practical bid for paradise: and by the time India heard of their doings Chakdara had been invested and the Malakand attacked in force.

Both were small, isolated posts, overwhelmingly outnumbered. The Chakdara garrison seemed past praying for. But there were those who knew that to the British officer and a handful of Frontier troops all things are possible: and Desmond was one.

"They'll hang on by their eyelids, and ring up the Guides," was his practical view of the matter. "Trust the Guides to do the trick for 'em." And they did. For the third time in their splendid history, they annihilated distance and saved a desperate situation. On a molten night of July they swung out of Hoti Murdán, at three hours' notice, cavalry and infantry, baggage and supplies complete; and covered thirty-six miles in sixteen hours. The march culminated in a long, steady climb under a blazing afternoon sun; but not a man of them fell out; and not an hour's rest could be granted them on arrival at the Malakand. Straight from that strenuous journey, they were told off to outpost duty; and spent the night in hand-to-hand fighting with the Mad Fakir and his legions of angels.

For five days and nights the little garrison fought on, almost without respite; while away up the river, at Chakdara, two companies of Sikhs and eleven

Cavalrymen under three British subalterns were still miraculously holding out in a fort that was a mere bridge-head badly placed for defence. Isolated, short of food and water, and hopelessly outnumbered, they hung on by their eyelids, as Desmond had said, for the best part of a week, till the Guides and the Bengal Lancers brought relief. The story of Chakdara, an epic in itself, is but one among many such recorded in the little-known annals of Frontier warfare; and the outstanding hero in most of them is the British subaltern, long misprized and misjudged, but now triumphantly coming into his own.

It was while these alarums and excursions were in full blast that an urgent wire summoned Sir Theo Desmond to Simla. The conflagration, though local, was serious enough to call for prompt and resolute action.

Sir Theo, sitting in his *dufter*, read that summons with very mixed feelings. It might mean punitive measures on a large scale; in which case the main command would probably be vested in himself. The mere prospect of action fired his blood; though the moment was not propitious, as regarded his own health or the time of year; and he did not relish leaving that precious child of his indefinitely with no Mother at hand to take his place. For the present she could remain with the Finlays; and the future must look after itself. Happily there was no room for indecision. There were simply plain orders to be obeyed and plain duty to be done: one of the many unrecognised blessings of Army life.

Having despatched his answer—"Starting immediately"—he informed an astonished bearer that he would leave for Pindi after tiffin: then he sent for his little girl. The parting was a bad business; but he could trust her pluck. She was her mother's daughter: never more so than in an emergency.

She appeared, prompt to his summons, in her delphinium gown, scissors and string still in her hands. She had been making a kite for Phil.

"Dads, what is it?" she asked, with wide eyes. "An official wigging?"

"No, not this time! An official summons—for your Twin. They want me at Simla about this flare up, and I must be off at once."

"Oh—how long?"

"Can't say. Possibly active service."

Her colour ebbed a little and he put out a hand, drawing her nearer. "You aren't scared? You know you aren't," he said quietly.

"N-no. But—*are* you properly well?"

"Oh, that's all right. The trouble is—I don't like leaving you stranded without Mother. And there's not much time for fixing up plans. I must start first possible minute after tiffin. Sit." He patted the arm of his chair and she obeyed. Under a mask of stillness her brain was working swiftly and to some purpose. "I thought of Gwen Finlay. She'd be enchanted to have you when Phyllis goes down. Unless you can persuade that model wife to stay up with you a bit longer."

But Thea had seen her chance—her one, undreamed-of chance—and she did not intend to let it slip. She foresaw objections; and, by way of prelude, leaned against his shoulder.

"Darling," she said, "if it isn't you, it simply *must* be Phyllis. I'd break my heart anywhere else. Mrs Finlay's a dear; but there'd be no home feeling——"

"Well, can you persuade Phyllis to stay?"

"No, not a crumb of a minute. But I want to persuade *you* to let me go with her. Do, Dads—*please* do."

Desmond started and frowned. "Lord, no. What on earth put such a wild notion into your head?"

"I think—my own heart put it there," she admitted, suddenly less resolute. "It's rather tangled up with my head. Always has been."

"No mistake about that! But the thing's impossible. The long journey in this heat——"

"Well, if Phyllis can do it and the children—— ?"

"They're Eden's affair. You're my affair—and Mother's. What's more, I can't spend half an hour arguing over this——"

"Then *don't* argue! Just say 'Yes' and be done with it. I know it sounds crazy; but there are lots of reasons—real reasons. I wouldn't mind the journey. And the Samana's not the plains. Six thousand feet. A nice breezy ridge——"

"A nice blazing ridge! No deodars to sit under. No use for Red Rover, perched up among stones and scrub."

"I don't care. I don't mind anything if only—oh, Father, *please*, I must go. I *must*. You don't understand——"

Her voice broke, and springing away from him she went over to the verandah door. There she remained, looking out upon a wavering landscape, her small hands clenched, fighting for self-control.

For a few minutes Desmond sat watching her, Simla and Frontier conflagrations forgotten. Thwarting her always seemed to him such a cruel and cowardly business. He wanted to take her in his arms, and kiss away the tears she was trying to hide from him; to confess that his own heart and head were badly 'tangled up' and that he could refuse her nothing in earth or heaven—which was true. If he could only feel sure of Vincent; or discover how far she felt sure of him. He could not bear to force her confidence, being himself the author of her reserve in matters of the heart. But before it came to consent—and he felt shamefully like consenting—he must know at least as much as she did.

"I've often been accused of spoiling you, Thea," he remarked gently to her slim figure and very erect head. "And I'm beginning to be afraid it's true. If I don't understand, whose doing is it—eh? It's the first time you've hurled those horrid words at my head; and I don't appreciate the compliment. Am I right in supposing that Phyllis isn't altogether responsible for that orgie of italics and the imperative mood?"

She nodded.

"Am I allowed to ask—who is, then?"

Her only answer was a smothered sound suspiciously like a sob.

"Come here, little girl," he said; and she obeyed. Dropping on to the floor beside him, she shielded her face by resting it against his elbow; and he was silent a moment, caressing her hair. Then: "Thea—are you in love with Vincent?" he asked quietly.

"Yes." It was a very small sound but a very definite one.

"The genuine thing? You're sure of it?"

"Horribly sure."

He sighed. The Other Man with a vengeance.

"Have you any reasonable grounds for supposing that—he is in love with you?"

"O-oh!" She covered her face. "Aren't you beginning to be rather ashamed of owning me?"

He tweaked a stray curl near her temple. "You know very well I've always been idiotically proud of that privilege, and I'll never be anything else. Now—your answer, please."

"There's only one letter," she murmured, "and a book with some lines—to me. You mightn't see anything in them. But I—I sort of feel it there. And things he said—at Kohat."

"H'm. Could you bring yourself to show me that letter? I've been a lover all my life, you know; so I might be able to feel it there too."

"And if you did?"

"I might find it possible to make concessions and risk the wrath of Lady Desmond!"

She seized his hand and kissed it. "Dads, I simply adore you," she said without looking up. No new discovery; but, in the circumstances, not a little consoling.

Then she darted out of the room, and returned with her treasures. These she laid on his knee; and slipping back into her old position, kept her face hidden from him while he read.

The pause that followed seemed interminable: for Desmond read parts of that long letter more than once. He smiled at the verses; a smile of genuine understanding: and Thea, hearing him fold the letter, raised her head.

"Can you—feel it there?" she asked; and slipping an arm round her shoulder, he kissed her cheek.

"That's a love-letter right enough—in intention if not in execution. Not precisely the sort I should have written to your Mother. But that's another story. You've chosen well, child. The boy's a slow study; but he is going to justify his existence one of these days. He may quite possibly become that formidable thing, a dreamer of action. D'you know why he never came up after all?"

"No. But I guess." And the barriers being down she dilated picturesquely on the way of the Mungoose, and her latest probable achievement.

Desmond nodded. "Some women are directly descended from the serpent, not from Eve."

"*She* is, anyway. So mean and cruel! Hurting him like that, just to try and draw him away from me. You said once he could be trusted to hold his own against her. But how *can* true people hold their own against lies?"

"That's a very searching question, little girl: one of the biggest problems of life But it's not business, which is all I've time for. I suppose matters are settled now to your ladyship's satisfaction."

"Are they? May I *really* go?"

"In the peculiar circumstances—you may. And God go with you," he added very low.

For answer she drew his head down to hers and they kissed long and fervently. It was their real 'Good-bye'; though the word was not spoken between them, then or afterwards.

Desmond and his Private Secretary clattered down the hill that afternoon, leaving Markham, the invaluable, to shepherd the helpless ones to Kohat. All had been privately explained to Phyllis. Thea had sent a

line to Vincent telling him of Desmond's departure—and her own. She had promised to be brave about her father, even if it should be active service: and the winged hope fluttering at her heart made courage easier, parting less hard to bear. She was going to see Vincent, and she was going to live in a 'real live Fort.' Given that blessed and most unexpected conjunction of events, nothing on earth seemed too good to come true.

PHASE V.

FORT GULISTAN

CHAPTER I.

"It is good to mount up as eagles; but there remains the task of learning to walk and not to faint."—J. KELMAN, Junr.

THEA'S short letter to Vincent found him still at Fort Lockhart, alone with Howard. The Colonel and Roddy had naturally gone off on leave; and, by one of those freaks in which Fate seems to take a particular delight, Vincent had been thrown for companionship, every day and all day, on the one man in creation he most heartily desired to avoid. His courage and resolution, it seemed, were to suffer no flimsy test. Week in, week out, he must talk and eat and work with the favoured lover; must endure the aggravation of watching and wondering—every week he wondered more—had Miss Williams conceivably been mistaken after all?

For the Howard of Fort Lockhart was not altogether the Howard of Kohat. The change, though slight, was unmistakable. He was less aggressive, yet more irritable, and in some respects more human; but to Vincent his bearing in no way suggested the secretly accepted lover. Perhaps there had been trouble with Sir Theo, or delay owing to Lady Desmond's absence? Perhaps the private engagement had not yet come off?

More and more Vincent suspected a hitch somewhere: though not once did he come within a mile of the truth. More and more also did he feel drawn towards this man, whom he had always half reluctantly admired, but with whom he had scarcely a

thought in common. But then, that other Vincent had been a soldier on compulsion, over critical, over ready to rebel against trifles. This new Vincent was a soldier by deliberate resolve; and if the Army were to be his permanent profession, he must, by some means, get at the soul of it: for that was his way. So far, he had spent most of his time cavilling mildly at the body of it: an unprofitable, though not unpopular, occupation. Long ago his eyes had shed the scales of prejudice. Now he began, dimly, to see the whole thing in a new perspective; and to realise that few men were fitter than Howard to complete his conversion. For Howard, though no *preux chevalier*, was a soldier to the marrow; a phrase that implies finer qualities of head and character than the average civilian is willing to admit—or was, before the Great Upheaval.

So, after a period of constraint and aloofness, Vincent had ventured cautiously out of his shell; and Howard's ready response had made him feel heartily ashamed of his earlier attitude, prompted partly by jealousy, partly by rage against the irony of things. Howard himself—being in no mood for his own society—had begun by cursing the complications that obliged Roddy to take second leave, and ended by making the best of a bad job: Vincent being the bad job of the moment. And he too had his reward.

He had very soon decided that Vinx was 'beginning to take notice'; and readily devoted his surplus time and energy to encouraging the process; not so much for Vincent's benefit, as with a view to increasing the efficiency of his beloved corps. A keen, competent adjutant, he knew very well that as the officers are, so is the regiment; and Vincent was no unpromising subject, as Howard had originally divined.

In the long evenings, and in the afternoons devoid of polo, racquets, or tennis, they had talked a good deal of shop, varied with reminiscences of 'little shows'

across the Border. For Howard was not the strong, silent man typical of his race. He could talk, and talk well, when he happened to choose; and during the process, Vincent learnt much of the organization and inner workings of an Indian regiment; of the hardships and excitements of Frontier warfare: better still, he began to catch glimpses of the finer, deeper significance of service in the Army. So true it is that the spirit of appreciation illumines, even as the spirit of carping hinders a true understanding of men and things.

Howard, for his part, had been frankly impressed by Vincent's remarkable knowledge of the tribes around them—of their ramifications, idiosyncrasies, and early history. His genuine interest had loosed Vincent's tongue even to the extent of extracting a confession that his leave had not been devoted to shikar; and the talk that followed brought them several degrees nearer to mutual understanding. "Didn't I prophesy long ago that you were after turning Fakir?" was Howard's final comment on this fresh revelation. "Lost to the world with a vengeance! No one guessing your whereabouts, eh?"

"Well, at the time—only the Desmonds knew," Vincent answered, trying to speak casually, without much success.

His constraint was catching. Howard muttered, "Oh—did they?" in a rather blank voice, and frowned fiercely at the bowl of his pipe.

It was the first time that name had been mentioned between them. "And why the devil should the Desmonds know?" was the unspoken question Howard addressed to his pipe. For an idea, a palpably crazy idea, had darted through his brain. Vinx—who had never so much as wooed her—the real reason of her bewildering change of front? Incredible! He himself must be crazy to dream of it: and in truth there were days when, promise or no promise, he came very near putting an end to everything. The high enclosing walls, and the stony-hearted country beyond,

held no word of comfort for his desolate spirit. He craved the minor distractions of life—the excitement of polo, the familiar friendliness of the Garrison Mess. Luckily Vincent played chess well, and Howard had taught him picquet. But work was slack and life itself a thing of purgatorial monotony in this isolated outpost on the edge of nowhere.

For the Samana command sprawled sparsely over a thirty-mile stretch of sheer Border country from Hangu—where a probationer was learning the ropes—to Thal, half-way along the Bannu road, where Major Williams languished without his whist, his anteroom gossip, or his wife and daughter. In Fort Lockhart, with Howard and Vincent, were three weak companies, many of the sepoys being on leave or scattered in picquets along the ridge. The fort itself was of the usual rectangular pattern; stone walls twelve to fifteen feet high, with loopholed bastions for flank defence. Four and a half miles westward, a smaller fort of the same pattern was in command of Eden, with Alton for company. Vincent would move on to Fort Gulistan when Roddy returned, and take over his old company again. Meantime, in spite of smouldering jealousies and doubts, he fully appreciated the opportunity of working under Howard for a change.

On the day that Thea's letter arrived, Howard had walked over to Gulistan on regimental business; and there he too heard the news. Eden was in great spirits at the prospect of his wife's return. He must go to Kohat with a small escort and bring them all up. Alton could be trusted to 'hold the fort' for twenty-four hours.

Privately, at parting, he sympathised with Howard, whose secret history he knew. "Rather odd of the General letting her come," said he. "But he'd not much time, I imagine, for tackling obstinate young ladies! And Thea's so dead keen on Phyllis I expect she simply swept the board. Lucky there's over four miles between us. So you can keep your distance anyway."

"Oh, rather," Howard agreed mechanically, doubting very much if he could.

He trod the rough path back to Fort Lockhart with head and heart in a turmoil of wonder, passion, and crazy hope, tinged with resentment at her wilful intrusion just as he was beginning to regain comparative peace of mind. It was obviously not the General's doing. He had simply given in to Thea's whim—as usual. Lord, how the man spoilt her! And how willingly he would do the same himself, if she would but give him the chance. If—if—! Impossible to stifle the mad hope that in spite of her "utterly and surely" the pendulum had miraculously swung again towards himself. Anyway, she should not whistle him back at her pleasure. It was the man's second nature to play his fish, even where his heart was deeply concerned. He would be in no hurry to call at Fort Gulistan.

And all the while, in the back of his mind, lurked the dread that her whim had no connection whatever with his rejected self.

Near Fort Lockhart he came suddenly on Vincent strolling outside the northern wall, in a state of exalted abstraction, with a certain letter in his pocket and a certain hope making havoc of his premature resignation. At sight of Howard he tumbled rather clumsily back to earth, and was chaffed accordingly.

"Good old Fakir! That's the way you moon around in my absence! Not much business to be got out of Eden either. He's in high jubilation. Family arriving on Wednesday. Lucky devils these married men—what? Eden says—Miss Desmond's coming along with 'em. The General's been wired for."

"Yes," remarked Vincent inadvertently, and stopped dead, perceiving what he had done.

Howard started. "How the deuce d'you know that?"

"I heard—after you left."

"From Sir Theo?"

"No: Miss Desmond."

"Oh!"

The silence fell as if a door had been slammed, and they moved on towards the Fort. But Howard could not leave it at that. The moment he had command of himself he spoke again.

"Great friends, are you—eh?"

"Well—on account of my stepfather—they reckon me almost one of the family."

"Lucky you! So you correspond?"

"Now and then."

That was all. But it sufficed to banish peace and thoroughly spoil their evening.

Again that crazy idea had darted through Howard's brain. Vinx—of all queer, impossible people! "But in that case," was his natural reflection, "why wasn't the damned idiot at Murree instead of fooling round Hindu shrines?" Howard dismissed that question as 'a poser,' and decided that your shy, silent chaps were the very devil. Here was the fellow actually developing into something like an officer, and perhaps he had also been developing along other lines, without the able assistance of a Howard.

But though the idea of Vinx as a serious rival struck him as 'a bit too thick,' it made him very irritable none the less. Their brief dinner was purgatory for both. Each was secretly obsessed by the other; and in their spasmodic efforts to manufacture casual remarks Howard failed more flagrantly than Vincent, which jarred his nerves more than ever. Later on, he proposed chess, by way of escape from making a further fool of himself; and Vincent jumped at the offer. But this time the flagrant failure was on his side.

Do what he would, his brain kept sliding off on vagrant expeditions unconnected with rooks and kings. In consequence, he played so wildly and made such egregious blunders that Howard lost his temper outright. With a sudden oath, he pushed back his chair and tipped up the board, sending rooks, kings, and pawns broadcast over the floor. Then he got up and

stood there, looking down at Vincent, who was mechanically setting up the pieces that remained.

"Mighty lot of use trying to play this damned game, if you won't give your lordly mind to it," said he; already ashamed of himself, but determined not to show it.

"I'm awfully sorry, Howard. Honestly I am," Vincent muttered, frowning. "I'm afraid I fuddled my brain too long over Persian to-day."

It was the partial truth; but it failed to propitiate.

"Well, you might have been decent enough to leave a corner of it clear for my benefit," Howard remarked in the cutting tones of one who holds temper in check. "Cheerful hole this without even a game of chess in the evening. And you're rotten at cards. If you're really in a state of mental bankruptcy, better go to bed."

Vincent rose quietly. "Thanks, I will. It would be pleasanter—than this. Good-night."

Howard knew quite well that he was being offensive, and he could not choose but admire Vincent's self-restraint. But that did not mend matters at the moment; and Vincent went out wondering consumedly what he was to infer from it all.

They met next morning as if nothing had happened; except that Howard, after his usual nod of welcome, added smiling: "No Persian to-day, Vinx! Not fair on me, you know, when I've had the luck to find an opponent really worth licking."

CHAPTER II.

"Night after night, in my sorrow,
The stars stood over the sea:
Till I looked—and lo, in the night,
My star had come down to me."

—R. L. S.

SOME two days after Fort Gulistan had been reinforced by 'the Murree Contingent,' Vincent remarked casually: "How about a raid on the Edens? I suppose we ought to call."

Howard shrugged his shoulders. He was comfortably settled in a long chair, browsing on a back number of the United Service Magazine. Work had been negligible that morning.

"Run along, by all means, if you're mad keen," he said, without removing his pipe. "I'm going to have a squint round the picquets when it's cooler. Give my love to the Contingent, specially Miss Flop. A kiss, if you're bold enough. Going to be a rare little devil, that girl. Mrs Eden won't expect the proprieties from me—bless her. You'll find her looking sweeter than ever after three months in the Hills."

So Vincent went off alone to Gulistan, increasingly mystified, yet increasingly hopeful withal.

Howard was right. He did find Phyllis looking sweeter than ever; less pale and large-eyed, though not less fragile than of old. And he found someone else looking lovelier than ever; with cheeks aflush and shining eyes and never one word of Howard, the

ungallant, who would not even send her a message of greeting. Undoubtedly there must be 'something up' between those two; and he would have given a year of his life to know what that something was. But at the moment he could only sun himself in the light of her presence, dimmed though it was by a shadow of embarrassment on both sides. The touch of constraint that had crept into her letters was present also in her manner, though at times it had the effect of making her feverishly talkative, a not uncommon symptom of shyness in excitable natures.

Though he stayed well over an hour, he had but a few moments alone with her: the result—though he did not guess it—of her private injunctions to Phyllis. Goodness knew she had been forward enough in coming at all, and she would not be thrown at any one's head, even if they were the shyest of the shy. So Phyllis dutifully mounted guard; and only Phyllis could have done it so charmingly that he never even wished her away.

Fort Gulistan was set on rising ground. From one corner there sloped downward a long narrow enclosure, known as the hornwork, bounded by low stone walls that were little more than sangars; and at the far end of this hornwork stood Eden's bungalow, a rough, unbeautiful abode. Here tea was served in the verandah for all, including Captain Alton and the children; and when Vincent ventured to bestow Howard's love on Flop's cheek, it was Thea who changed colour and also made haste to change the subject.

Mercifully there was plenty to talk about in this new world, where every detail was of absorbing interest. She was rather volubly delighted with everything; above all with the fact that here she could stand on the very edge of the Frontier and look right into the country of the Orakzais and the wild Afridi highlands beyond. And beneath the volubility, her heart was in a riotous flutter of happiness, simply to be sitting in that verandah, with Vincent's eyes

shyly seeking her own and Vincent's voice sounding in her ears.

"It's all so big and primitive and so divinely empty of superfluous people." She waved a comprehensive arm towards the Valley. "Just ourselves and the invisible Orakzais," was her epitome of the situation; and Eden laughed his chuckling laugh, that signified a barometer at 'set fair.'

"Jolly good company the Orakzais, I can tell you, when they get their tails up and drop the invisible touch."

Thea turned on him eagerly. "Will they ever—d'you think—while we're here?"

"I've every reason to hope they won't," Eden replied, glancing round the tea-table that was his life, even as the Regiment was his world.

"Oh, but it *would* be exciting! And if they dared to venture on to *our* ridge I'm sure they'd leave their tails behind them."

"Quite so. But they look on this as their ridge. That's the trifling difference between us. Your father gave them an almighty thrashing a few years ago; and these forts were built afterwards by way of clinching the argument. Some said it was a mistake. Sort of permanent threat. I think Sir Theo was one. But we shan't have any trouble to speak of over here if the fizzle at the other end is properly damped down. I wish they could have let Sir Theo loose on 'em. You can always trust *him* never to leave a job half done."

Thea beamed on the speaker with such a soft light in her eyes that Vincent suffered a tweak of jealousy. It really wasn't fair. But the next moment she turned to him.

"Poor Dads! I never told you. Such a disappointment. After rushing off post-haste from Murree to Simla, he collapsed at the other end. They meant him to have the command. But the doctors said 'No'; and he seems quite laid up just for the moment. I'm wishing I was there to nurse him."

"I'm not," Vincent answered very quietly, with a

sudden direct look that recalled to both their parting at Kohat.

Eden was speaking to Phyllis, and for a few seconds they prolonged that silent contact, while the blood crept slowly into Thea's cheeks. Then Phil intervened and talk became general again. But to the girl it was as if he had actually held her for a moment and let her go. Even this first hour of meeting revealed an indefinable change in him—a new kind of quietness that suggested new reserves of strength. Before, she had always inclined to think of him as a boy. Now he seemed verily a man—her man; would he but bestir himself to make the discovery.

As for Vincent, walking home in the cool of the evening, he reverted again and again to the memory of that one instant, as a man who has pocketed a rare jewel keeps fingering it to make sure it is there. He had walked nine miles, and spent an hour in desultory talk—simply for that: and simply for that, he was prepared to walk nine miles again any day of the week. How much or how little it might signify he had not enough experience to tell. He only knew he must see her again and again till doubt was at an end. Above all, he wanted to see her with Howard, whom Mrs Eden had included in an invitation to come over next week, when the moon would be nearly full, and stay for dinner.

Howard, yawning prodigiously over a novel, made airy enquiries after the Contingent. Mrs Eden's invitation he received with a slight shrug.

"Awfully kind of her. Depends how things are going nearer the time. It's quite on the cards there may be dramatic developments. Eden's optimistic. Always is. And just now it suits his book. But I'm all for keeping on the *qui vive*. It's a far cry from Swat to the Samana; but you bet those cursed Mullahs are making hay all over the shop."

Thus Howard—notably a man of shrewd judgment: and before the moon was much nearer the full, there were signs abroad that his opinion might soon be

justified by events. To begin with, the optimism of Gulistan was shaken, not a little, by an irate and outspoken letter from Mrs Geoff Olliver—*alias* Frank Olliver—whose husband commanded the Peshawur Division. Frank and Phyllis had foregathered at Bannu, in early days; and whoso won Frank's friendship, won it for life.

She wrote now, in her vigorous masculine fashion, of increasing suspicions that Peshawur itself would be the scene of the next flare up, unless the political authorities kept their eyes wider open, and their brains alert.

"But d'you suppose they'll do any such thing?" queried this soldier-woman of wide experience and somewhat biassed judgment. "Is it troubling their heads they are at all over sound information that the Mohmands have got a big picnic on near Shankagarh, and the Hadda Mullah's stirring up the people? Why for should the dear good Mohmands be after twisting the lion's tail? And my poor Geoff's an alarmist—likely, isn't it, we that know him?—because he mildly suggests a move towards the Border by way of a hint that this particular weasel's not asleep. Sure as fate it'll be the same old story. 'Unfounded rumours,' till the tribes snap a few thousand fingers under our noses, and our blessed soldier-men pay the piper—with their lives. It's Theo we're needing here, to give us a few electric shocks. Bad luck the dear man's on the sick list. And I hear his precious 'Little Girl' is with you. She was a rare gem at seven years old. I'd love to see her again."

Making due allowance for the writer's idiosyncrasies, that letter was sufficiently discomposing: and two days later every newspaper in India bore witness to the truth of those unfounded rumours. Before Olliver's moveable column left Peshawur the 'dear good Mohmands' had achieved the most daring raid in recent years. British territory had been invaded; the village of Shankaghar was in flames; but the inhabit-

ants had saved their skins by timely flight into Shabkadr Fort, where they were gallantly defended by a handful of Border Police. And these things happened within seventeen miles of the largest British cantonment on the Border.

"Damn!" was Eden's comprehensive comment as he flung down that unwelcome paper. Phil looked up from his porridge with awed interest. Explosions were rarer nowadays, and they thrilled him, rather, except when they chanced to come his way. His mother watching him, in tender amusement, felt a sudden stab of fear lest, by her very devotion, she was sacrificing the life dearest to her on earth. Already the change had told on him. Already the too familiar symptoms of Frontier fever were threatening again: and now this fresh news set her wondering—ought she not, for every one's sakes, to have remained in Murree? But, after all, she had lived too long on the Frontier to be seriously alarmed by a raid, however daring; and she had the serene confidence of her kind in Piffer officers and men. The Afridi and Orakzais, as she very well knew, cared not a cowree for Mohmand grievances; and if an outraged Government hit back hard enough they would think twice about airing their own.

To that end she spoke, and Eden responded readily enough. British to the bone, he possessed in full measure the racial talent for shutting his eyes to an uncomfortable truth. And certainly the blows struck by the column from Peshawur were prompt as the heart of any soldier could wish. The over-confident Mohmands, caught in the open, were effectually demolished by one of the most brilliant cavalry charges on record. But those first operations revealed more serious trouble behind. A big punitive expedition was decided on, and the Mohmand Field Force came rapidly into being.

Meantime reports grew and spread of a concerted rising from Peshawur to the Kurram Valley, well beyond Kohat. On the Samana, local rumours were

many and contradictory. Marauding bands infested the roads, and minor outrages, like straws, showed the way of the wind. All over the Frontier, Mullahs were fanning the flame of *Jehad*. That, said Howard, was the most serious factor in the whole affair: since only a great wave of fanaticism could produce concerted action amongst the uncohesive tribes of the Border.

Vincent noted how every day his companion's face took on sterner lines, and the old challenging look returned to his eyes. The man was, before everything, a soldier; and given the prospect of action, no woman could retain full command of his thoughts. Still—on her account and others—he was anxious; and he made no secret of his relief when St John threw up his leave, and reappeared at Fort Lockhart to resume command. Like all men of real knowledge and judgment, he was neither gloomy nor over-confident in the hour of crisis: and scarcely, since the Mutiny, had there been a more critical hour for England in India. Neither a wobbler nor an aggressor, he never frittered time or energy on criticising higher authorities; but he knew his own job inside and out. He conserved all his capacities for the moment of action; and when that moment came, there were few that cared to stand up against him.

He now merely remarked that there was every indication of 'a big show,' and that the Government at last seemed alive to the fact. A pity Eden had women and children on his hands; but he doubted the wisdom of attempting their removal to Kohat—a matter of thirty-seven miles: and there was no railway, then, beyond the Indus. They would be an additional anxiety, of course: but with six British officers and half a battalion of Sikhs, their safety, humanly speaking, was assured.

As regards the awakening of the higher powers, St John was right. Daily, almost, the outlook darkened; and a long-suffering Government arrived at the conclusion that active measures over the Border must

be backed up by precautionary measures elsewhere. The Peshawur garrison was strengthened; and from all parts of India troops rolled northwards. Two reserve Brigades were concentrated at Pindi; and Sir Theo Desmond, arising from his sick-bed, insisted on returning to his post, where at least he could conduct operations, even if he were unfit to take the field—which remained to be seen.

From Pindi, he wrote a strongly-worded letter to Eden on the risk of keeping women and children in an advanced post. Why had they not been removed sooner? He himself had been very ill; how ill, Thea must not know. Papers had been forbidden him, for a time; so that he had not grasped the bigger possibilities looming ahead. He must request—and the request had a note of command—that arrangements be made at once for the move to Kohat, if this was any way possible, now, without involving risks which certainly must not be run; and he wrote in the same strain to St John, on whose judgment he could rely.

It was on the day this letter arrived that Vincent paid his second visit to Fort Gulistan, again without Howard, whose excuses were valid enough. No lively tea-party in the verandah this time; but an atmosphere of anxiety and discussion heightened by another Peshawur letter announcing 'the latest' from across the border. "The last report has it," wrote Frank Olliver, "that the Afridis and Orakzais have joined hands in earnest and mean to ring up the curtain by making a clean sweep of the Khyber, with a general massacre to follow. Pretty sort of news! And good authority, too. But our confident folk here just shake their heads and ask who'd be the fools to believe such crazy talk?"

Eden, it must be admitted, did his best to follow the lead of the men who were paid to know. But between secret qualms and slight resentment at the tone of Desmond's letter, Vincent found him in a state of repressed irritability that recalled Kohat days. Nor were his spirits improved by the fact that Phil was

in bed with fever, and Phyllis so far from well that she seemed likely to follow his example. How the devil were *they* to be packed off to Kohat, he would like to know (Phyllis being at the moment absent with her boy): let alone the difficulty of a sufficient escort and the risks of the road, if half the tales one heard were true?

Alton, genuinely sorry for the man, assured him that, as neither Mrs Eden nor the boy were, in his opinion, fit to travel, the matter had practically settled itself; while Vincent added his quota of comfort by repeating the Colonel's remarks on the subject. For that last Eden was pathetically grateful. If the two regimental autocrats were for him, who could be against him? And after all, what harm could befall a couple of Englishwomen, when every man on the ridge would give his life cheerfully sooner than a hair of their heads should suffer hurt?

Further encouragement was administered by Thea. Reaching out for Eden's tea-cup, she lightly patted his arm. "Don't go bothering yourself about me," she commanded. Tone and touch were that of a mother soothing a troubled child. "You've plenty else to think of—miles more important. It's the best bit of luck I ever had in my life, and I shall tell Father so when I write. Even if it *does* come to a little fighting, Phyllis and I would a hundred times sooner be here, just helping where we can, than stuck away in Kohat, aching for news. And I hope nobody's going to die for the hairs of our heads; though I have rather a weakness for mine!"

Her deft touch of humour cleared the air. "So have a good few of us!" Eden retorted, laughing. "Not to mention Leigh, there, who can't keep his eyes off it. You write to Sir Theo. That's a bargain. Give him the benefit of your views on the military situation! And I'll get St John to write too."

At that moment Phyllis rejoined them; and Eden, rising instantly, proffered her his chair. "Thea and the Colonel and Alton," he told her, "seem to have

pretty well settled it between them that I'm to hang on to my family."

"Bless them all," she said, smiling at him and putting out a hand for her tea.

He laughed contentedly. "I've a notion Sir Theo will put it the other way about!"

Vincent did not stay to dinner after all. The Colonel had said "Better be back"; and he consoled himself with the thought that Roddy's cancelled leave would soon set him free. He found courage to speak of this when chance—or Phyllis—gave him a few moments alone with Thea before leaving.

"Next time I come here," he said, looking up at the unbeautiful mass of the fort against the sky, "I hope it will be for good."

"Oh—will it?" she started unmistakably; and her eyes took the same direction as his own. "Then, if there's fighting—you'll be here with us?"

"Yes." He hesitated a second. "Would that—make you feel any safer?"

"Lots." The word came out with such unguarded emphasis, that she felt quite thankful for Eden's appearance with a note for St John. "Time you were moving, Leigh," he said. "Give this to the Colonel, and tell him I shan't be sorry to have my subaltern back again."

"I shan't be sorry to come," Vincent answered frankly: and taking leave of them both he rode back to Fort Lockhart with yet another jewel in his possession.

CHAPTER III.

"I go to prove my soul.
I see my way, as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive!"
—BROWNING.

DAYS passed. A week passed. And still, in the Khyber region, the Afridis made no move. Everywhere a curious quiet prevailed. News from beyond the Frontier came slowly through to India; and as August burnt itself out things began to look like a 'score' for the so-called optimists: the most ill used word in the language. For if optimism mean anything, it means the power to face life, in all its vicissitudes, with clear-eyed courage and faith. But the pink-spectacle form of optimism is the more comforting, hence the more infectious; and the complaisance of the higher powers was inevitably echoed in the press.

So it came about that, on a certain morning, while a certain newspaper was confidently enlarging on the moral effect of prompt military movements, discrediting rumours from the Kurram, and dismissing the fear of concerted trouble, a powerful *lashkar* of Afridis was already moving down from the Tirah:—and, on the very next day, they were swarming in their thousands through the Khyber Pass.

A man wakened by a burglar holding a pistol to his head, might conceivably gauge the sensations with which Anglo-Indians, at their breakfast tables, read that incredible news. Gradually details emerged; the

same old story, as Frank Olliver had foreseen. Someone had blundered. Someone had not known, who ought to have known. The political officer, in charge at Landi Kotal, had written promptly to Peshawur for reinforcements. Civil authority had replied by ordering him back to Jamrud; and the advancing Afridis had found the key of Northern India garrisoned by a handful of Khyber Rifles, who held out stubbornly for twenty-four hours, confident of the help that never came. Then, by treachery, the fort had been entered, looted, fired; and the Afridis were very soon masters of the Pass.

The blow dealt to British prestige was incalculable. Indignation ran high: but blame and criticism availed nothing. The thing was done; and it remained for the soldier-men—as Frank again had said—to pay the piper with their lives.

By that swift, astonishing stroke, Orakzai hesitation was dispelled once for all. Word went forth that the Afridis had blackened the face of the Sirkar: and while feverish activity prevailed at Peshawur, news from Kurram and the Samana produced an equal liveliness at Kohat. Desmond, still far from well, sent up a substitute, with a force from Pindi, to take command of affairs. Back from hill stations and from happier hunting-grounds sped subalterns and their seniors, each to his post of drudgery or danger, as the gods might decree. Jerry, with a rueful heart, rattled down from Murree, where a certain face was just pleasantly beginning to haunt his brain; ran against Roddy at Pindi; collected a Sapper subaltern up the line; and so, on to Fort Lockhart, where only the British blood in Howard's veins saved him from greeting Roddy with an unseemly embrace. The sight of that job-lot of features, irradiated with sublime good humour, was balm of Gilead to his heart; torn at the moment between a half-acknowledged respect for Vincent and the intense aggravation of his inevitable transfer to Eden's company.

It was a rough uneven road, mercilessly exposed to the August sun, from Fort Lockhart to Gulistan; but for Vincent it was the road to Paradise. Hope had at last begun to put forth leaves in the shy recesses of his heart; and perhaps a week or so of daily intercourse might transmute hope into divine certainty. So he would be spared the ordeal of that bald question, beyond which he felt convinced his tongue would never adventure; unless, of her mercy, she would meet him half-way.

But when, at length, the fort itself loomed upon the skyline, his thoughts returned to the all-absorbing topic of the moment; and he realised, with a new stir in his blood, that, before many days were out, the crucial test of his manhood might be sprung upon him in good earnest. Hard to believe that down there, in the depths of the Khanki Valley, lurked thousands of Orakzais, thirsting for infidel blood, whether Christian or Sikh. There was something exciting—rather unpleasantly exciting—about the sense of their hidden presence. What would be the precise nature of his own feelings, he wondered, when it pleased them to 'drop the invisible touch'? Would he prove himself, in the hour of extremity, worthy or unworthy of the distinguished name he bore.

From the great days of Elizabeth, and earlier still, the men of Devon, from whom he sprang, had, in the main, been fighters of distinction, whether on sea or land. Though politics, literature, and pure adventure had claimed a few, the honours of the family rested with its sailors and soldiers: and this latest Leigh was aware of a dawning ambition that his own name might be added to the list. That very ambition increased his secret fear lest innate dread of witnessing or inflicting pain should make him to seem to play the coward, just when he most ardently desired to play the man. He was, in fact, afraid of being afraid:—the higher form of cowardice, and no uncommon element even in soldiers of fine

quality, whose cowardice is the measure of their courage.

But very soon disturbing doubts were swallowed up in the joy of arrival. It was good to be welcomed with genuine warmth by Eden, by his old friend Afzul Khan, and others among the Native Officers and men: good to take possession of a room in the hornwork bungalow, and to be under one roof with her whom he now definitely hoped to win. The pervading sense of home gave a lift to his spirits, even as Thea's new touch of shyness and seriousness gave a lift to his heart.

Phyllis—too ill to withstand Eden's insistence—had followed her boy's example, for the moment: so Vincent found Thea in charge of every one, including a rampageously healthy Flop, who spent most of her time perched on her father's back, a plump leg over each shoulder, addressing him as 'eppin,' goading him with a wooden ankus, and trilling with joy whenever he broke into a run. This game reached its height at tea-time: and Vincent, watching father and child absorbed in each other, felt his heart contract at the thought of that hidden threat lurking in the valley.

He found his men strung up to a pitch of fierce, restrained eagerness to smite; and later in the evening he had some talk with Afzul Khan, in whose hawk-like eye there gleamed a spark that he had not seen there yet.

"You believe they will come—soon?" he asked; and the Subadar wagged his beard.

"I should say rather, Sahib, that they *have* come. There remains only one question—when will they strike? Doubtless it was intended they should strike in the Kurram when the Afridi-*lōg* struck in the Khyber. Doubtless also these curs of Orakzais waited to make sure if times were good or bad: and, by Allah, had the Sirkar smitten my people strongly in the Khyber, no trouble would have been here. Now—

shurum ka baht[1]—they say we are afraid. Let them only come and make trial! Very soon, to-morrow may be, we shall see."

Afzul Khan was right. On the morrow—they saw. And even before the morrow—they heard.

That night the Khanki Valley gave up its lurking secret, and a general attack began on all the minor posts along the ridge. To Gulistan came news of trouble at Shinwari; and the first gleam of dawn showed all the commanding heights dark with rapidly moving forms that emitted jets of flame, puffs of smoke, and the sharp 'phit-phit' of Lee-Metfords: for they were well supplied with smuggled British arms.

Within the fort, every man was at his post: had been for hours: and Eden—resolutely dismissing the thought of wife and children and another man's daughter—was giving his whole mind to the game he loved better and played better than any on earth. Only the presence of those others made it a more responsible business than usual; especially as he felt a trifle doubtful about the sort of backing he would get from Leigh.

A brief reconnoitre towards the Samana Suk revealed the enemy posted, in formidable strength, along two miles of hills, and sent Eden back hurriedly to signal for reinforcements from Fort Lockhart. Rising ground hid the two forts from each other; and the small post of Saraghari, midway between them, alone made rapid communication possible.

"Wish to God they'd seen fit to strengthen us with a couple of mountain guns," he said, as the message flashed along the ridge. "Then we could hold out against the blooming lot and give 'em hell into the bargain."

Guns or no, Fort Lockhart responded promptly to that call for help; and at half-past nine, while Thea was presiding over a hurried breakfast, in walked St

[1] Shameful talk.

John and Howard with a hundred and thirty Sikhs at their back.

Straightway the Colonel and Eden plunged into technicalities; and Thea, smitten dumb for once in her life, could only hold out her hand to Howard without a word. He gripped it hard; and Vincent, watching them, was tormented by the old jealousy and fear of Kohat days.

"There's plenty of tea still. Won't you have a cup after your march?" Thea was saying in a voice that just failed to be natural; nor was Howard's manner a much greater success.

"No, thanks. We've breakfasted. But I'd like to smoke, if I may."

"Do, please," she said, busying herself with Vincent's second cup; and as she returned it, her gaze dwelt a moment on the unconscious Vincent, who thanked her without looking up. In that moment Howard had his final answer; and he took it without wincing, incredible though he found it even now.

Mercifully the day's work seemed likely to demand his entire attention. St John wasted no time in comment on a situation that began to look serious enough. Against such formidable numbers, operations in the open were out of the question; and all troops were at once concentrated within the walls. The force on the Samana Suk had drawn stealthily nearer: and now, from high ground, barely half a mile off, they opened a galling fire on the fort and the hornwork, its chief source of weakness.

Phyllis and Thea, forbidden even to venture into the verandah, sat together, engaged in futile occupations—listening, wondering, and heartily wishing themselves men. But both were upheld by supreme faith in their defenders; and neither knew the misery of personal fear. For the children it was all a wildly exciting game; the only question of vital interest being: "How many Awksyes Daddy would kill?"

So the morning wore on; till St John remarked to Howard, in his measured tones, "Those fellows are making themselves too much of a nuisance. Better take out half a company, you and Leigh. Get as near them as you can and administer a little discouragement."

Vincent received his orders a few minutes later. "Right," he said; and something in his voice made Howard glance at him keenly as they led out their inadequate handful of Sikhs to discourage several thousand marksmen admirably placed for picking off the sublime fools who came out against them.

Howard had often wondered about Vinx: would his grit or his imagination decide matters when it came to the point? And he was wondering now. The boy carried his head well; but the set of his jaw suggested conflict within. Howard, in very early days, had himself known some unpleasant moments; and he recognised the present job as no easy one for a novice. It demanded just that cool, seasoned courage which only discipline and experience can give.

"Feeling a bit jumpy?" he asked; and Vincent nodded truthfully.

"Nothing to mention: I'll be all right soon."

"Sooner than you think for, old chap." There was unusual sympathy in Howard's tone. "Keep cool; and pick out your man. Lord, we must hurry. Those brutes are after Picquet Hill."

In the confused rush of noise and movement that followed, Vincent tried hard to keep cool and pick out his man. But revolver practice was one thing and this was very much another. The shots and shouts that beat upon his ears seemed to stupefy his brain. In a measure, they also stupefied his feelings; which was a mercy. His first sensation, when a mass of yelling devils bore down upon them, was that of a man set upon by a herd of mad bulls. Every normal instinct prompted flight. His will seemed paralysed:

his brain in a whirl. He was only aware of faces, hideous faces and still more hideous sounds; and he wanted to get away from them more acutely than he had ever wanted anything in his life.

As he swung round on his heel, he fired off three revolver shots, blindly, in quick succession: then—what he might or might not have done, in that critical moment, who shall say?

A strong hand gripped his arm and the voice of Afzul Khan steadied his scattered senses.

"*Shahbash*, Leigh Sahib! Two *badmashis* checked with three shots. It is the work of a marksman. Is there hurt? I feared your Honour would fall."

"No—no hurt," Vincent answered quickly; and the suspicion flashed through him that the big Afridi had saved him from a worse hurt than any bullet could inflict. But he was himself again now. The madness had past. "Wounded two of them, did I? Sheer luck. Where's Howard Sahib?"

Before the words were out, he saw for himself. Howard, a few paces in advance, stopped dead, swayed and sat down involuntarily on a terraced ledge of earth.

With a cry, Vincent sprang forward and slipped an arm round his shoulder. "Hit, are you?" he asked; and at once became aware of blood oozing through Howard's left sleeve, just below his own hand.

"Nothing much. Flesh wound. I did my best to go on. It's just loss of blood. Damned nuisance!" The words came out rapidly in a rather uncertain voice. "Got a flask on you. Give me a nip." He took more than a nip, for he was near fainting: while a group of his men formed a shield for their officers and a hospital orderly hurried up with first aid appliances.

"When were you hit?" Vincent asked anxiously.

"Oh, early in the day. They got the range of me pretty quick. I'm such a ripping target! Look here,

Vinx; no time for fooling round. These chaps'll keep me safe till I can move. You take old Afzul and cut off those parties making for the water. See? If the water fails, we're done. You've the chance to show what you're made of—and the biggest inducement on earth. Go ahead!"

Those last words hardly astonished Vincent more than they astonished Howard himself. He had decided, at breakfast-time, that Vinx was still too blind or too modest to realise things, and he did not feel called upon to enlighten him. Yet now, in a moment of generous impulse, the soldier triumphed over the man. Instinctively he applied the surest spur he knew of, lest Vincent falter in the task of leading others, where it was none too easy to follow.

And Vincent faltered not a whit. With sword unsheathed, he sprang forward, followed by Afzul and his Pathans. For the first time, he too shouted like the rest and exulted in the prompt response of his men; in the knowledge that whither he led, they would follow. Of a sudden his brain had become astonishingly clear. A new spirit seemed to spring up within him and take command of things: perhaps the spirit of his dead father. Fresh swarms of tribesmen, descending from the hill, made his task manifestly impossible: but that mattered nothing. All that mattered was to obey Howard, to prove worthy of Thea:—and it was with genuine disappointment that he heard the bugle sound, "Retire."

For St John, watching from the defences, saw, what Vincent could not see, that there was urgent need to temper valour with discretion. They retired in good order, with very few casualties: but retreat implied that they were too heavily outnumbered to attempt further sorties unassisted by guns.

Afternoon brought news from Fort Lockhart of determined attacks at the eastern end of the ridge and the loss of two police posts, manned by levies. Thereupon, St John sent back half his detachment

under the Subadar Major; but himself decided to spend the night at Gulistan. For that decision Eden was profoundly grateful: St John being one of those imperturbable men whose mere presence seems a guarantee that all will go well.

As for Howard, he flatly rebelled against being relegated to hospital. He knew Mrs Eden could find room for him in the bungalow. She was the sort that could always find room for every one. It would be sufficiently distracting to see Thea with Leigh; but almost anything seemed more endurable than the company of his own thoughts.

Of course Mrs Eden found room: and later in the evening—as he lay alone, in an enclosed corner of the verandah, with a pipe and a batch of Home papers—Thea took courage to come and express her genuine concern.

"I'm ever so sorry you were hit," she said, standing before him, with hands loosely clasped, trying to look at him without confusion of face.

"Mere trifle," he said quietly. "It's disappointing to be knocked out of things. That's all." He paused, looking up at her. "If you're really sorry, though, you might come closer and talk to me for a bit."

She came closer; but could think of no safe subject except his wound. "Will it knock you out for long? Does it hurt much?"

"Lord, no. None of those devils out there can hurt me half as badly as you've done, several times over. That's a fact."

She frowned and bit her lip.

"Don't say that! It's not true. You only want to punish me."

"Punish you? The punishment's all on my side—seeing you with Leigh."

The softening of her whole face at that name was at once the most beautiful and the most maddening thing he had ever beheld. He suddenly put out a

hand and grasped one of hers, drawing her nearer still.

"Thea," he said huskily, "tell me this much. It's only fair. Has it always been — Leigh standing between us?"

At that the colour mounted to her temples.

"Oh, why *will* you always ask impossible questions? I — Mr Leigh — there isn't anything — yet."

"Tell that to Vinx! He may believe you. I've one too many eyes in my head, But I'm sorry if I hurt your sweet maiden modesties." His voice took its thrilling note and he pressed the fingers he held. Howard might fall in love again and marry happily; but it is a question whether any other woman would ever stir the depths of him as did this girl, with her pride and tenderness and crystal purity of spirit. "But look here, in Murree, you leaned my way more than a little—eh?"

"I did. Honestly I did. And . . . oh, you must try to forgive me. I can't explain."

"Not even what made you so utterly certain that morning?"

"It was a letter . . . from him. I knew then I simply couldn't——"

Howard swore under his breath; and she tried gently to free her fingers. "Please. It's not fair. You're not supposed to.—Someone might come."

"No fear. He's very much occupied just now. And it's plain *I* can't stand in his light any more. I tell you what, though; he must change his regiment. He shan't deprive me of everything——"

"Oh, *do* be quiet!" she broke in; and this time, by a swift move, she released her hand. "You seem to forget. Nothing's happened yet."

"It will though, jolly soon. Even the phenomenal Vinx can't keep silence much longer. I gave him the straight tip this morning."

"You? How *dared* you?" she demanded with the

lift of her chin that he loved. "I won't be thrust down people's throats. *What* did you say?"

"Nothing much. Perhaps he missed the point. He was a bit excited at the time. Personally, I think it was rather decent of me to say anything."

She was all contrition in a moment. "Yes—yes. I've no business to be angry. It was splendid of you."

"Not a bit of it. A mere impulse." But he knew he had been magnanimous, and it was balm to hear her say so. "Leigh had rather a nasty job to take on when I was hit. I wanted to make sure of him: so I said he had a chance to show what he was made of—and the biggest inducement on earth. That's all. I suppose he took my meaning. Anyway, he gave the men a right good lead before he was recalled."

"You may say what you like—it *was* splendid of you," she repeated; and stood silent a moment, meditating some excuse to slip away.

"Thea," he said suddenly in a changed voice, "you wouldn't let me kiss you that night. And I might have taken it without asking. It was a big temptation. Won't you give me the ghost of a kiss—now? I shall insist on going back with the Colonel, and after that —the less I see of you the better."

He did not look at her in speaking, and she hesitated so long that he gave up hope. Then, with a swift movement she came to him, laid a light hand on his shoulder and her lips just brushed his hair: the ghost of a kiss, no more. "That means—I'm utterly penitent," she whispered: and before he could command his voice, he was alone.

He bullied Alton into letting him ride back with St John next morning: and had the satisfaction of knowing that the Colonel was glad of his services, wounded or no.

Thea he did not see again; and although his eyes sought for her, his reason said: "Better so."

By now Gulistan was practically invested; but the enemy had withdrawn to their original heights; and so curiously fitful are tribal tactics, that it seemed quite possible they might rest content with the capture of three police posts and a noisy demonstration. At all events, St John must look after his end of the ridge; and Eden, while preparing for the worst, obstinately continued to hope for the best.

CHAPTER IV.

"We have made a truce with death for once, and only for a few fragrant hours we two have been made immortal."—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

PREPARATION for the worst took the form of shifting the women and children into the fort itself; of strengthening the stout thorn hedge, that formed an abattis beyond the low wall of the hornwork; and of detailing forage parties to bring in every drop of water available: a poor supply at best for a hundred and sixty humans, to say nothing of animals. These little outings, often led by Jerry or Vincent, and the domestic upheaval, very much led by Thea, kept every one busy for the next day or two; while interested onlookers from the heights amused themselves with long-range sniping—a safe game beloved of their kind. Perhaps they hoped, by these mild tactics, to put the infidels off their guard. Perhaps, being cautious folk, they were waiting to make sure of Afridi support.

For Vincent and Thea, those few days were among the happiest they would ever live through. As no hour in the twenty-four holds the peculiar thrill and wonder of dawn, and no month in the year rivals that in which the earth first turns in her sleep, so, for the lover, that is his divinest hour when he first begins to feel sure of the beloved, while some not altogether perverse instinct withholds him from too hasty snatching at the jewel under his hand. To the average man, such delicate hesitancies are unknown.

They belong to that more complex being, the poet-lover, whose joy is apt to be in promise rather than attainment; in worship rather than possession. By Howard's magnanimous impulse, the doubts of both had been dispelled; and while each still wondered, "Can this thing be?" the blood in their veins gave answer: "It can be, and it is."

So they went about their work, like Stevenson's lantern-bearers, cloaking a secret light; rejoicing simply in the knowledge that it was there.

As a matter of fact, their particular lanterns refused to be hidden. Both Phyllis and Jerry, being quite aware of them, merely wondered when those two very dear and foolish people would give up their childish game and fall into each other's arms.

"Tell you what, Vinx," Jerry remarked on the second evening after Howard's departure, "if you don't look sharp about it, I'll propose to Miss Desmond myself!"

"It wouldn't hurt me if you did," was all the encouragement he received. And Jerry went away pondering on that very un-Vinx-like reply.

As for Vincent, though he did not choose to admit it, he had been making shy, tentative efforts all day to secure the Great Opportunity: but Thea herself had baulked him at every turn. What was the sense of avoiding him, he wondered,—floundering in depths of masculine ignorance,—when her smiles and blushes seemed to say as plain as words, "Why don't you come and take what is your own?" From this it may be gathered that he had made strides of late. He could not know that Howard's straight tip was at the root of the mystery: that Thea was deliberately holding him off, 'for a wee while,' just to satisfy her wicked pride. The move, and the fact that Phyllis was rather prostrate next day, gave her ample excuse for being generally in too much of a hurry for quiet talk; and Vincent's own leisure moments had been few.

That night, after dinner, as things seemed quieter,

she played to them all. Jerry contributed a song or two, and she wound up with the 'Rosamunde' music, which Vincent took for a challenge. But she slipped away early with Phyllis, leaving the men to themselves; and Vincent, going his rounds, decided that on the morrow something drastic must be done. If this sort of thing went on, doubts would revive. They were reviving already. By some means, he must manage to claim her while courage and conviction were at their height.

But the morrow was marked for fighting, not love-making. Day had scarcely dawned before the Orakzais began to swarm down again from the heights, with that locust-like effect which either unnerved or stimulated a man according to the spirit in his veins. And in Vincent's veins the fighting spirit began already to make itself felt. He had not dreamed that it could ever give him the smallest satisfaction to kill a fellow-being: but with women and children to defend against savages, he had been less than a man had not the satisfaction been born in him now.

All the morning the Sikhs kept up a steady fire, in the vain hope of preventing the occupation of Picquet Hill, a knoll three hundred yards from the fort. But the enemy came steadily on, taking skilful advantage of rocks and scrub and the terraced formation of the ground that sloped away from the walls.

They were not the only bold adventurers, however, on that unclouded day of September. News of their activities brought St John back with a small detachment to give what help he could; and the sight of him was worth half a company of rifles to every man in the beleaguered fort.

It was near tiffin-time before Vincent and Thea even exchanged a word: and to both it seemed no moment for talking of themselves.

"Do you think—are they going to make things very lively?" she asked, with what he called the soldier light in her eyes.

"I'm afraid so—if they get a footing on the hill."

"Can't we stop them?"

Vincent looked doubtful. "We could—if we had guns. Anyway, we'll do our best. Those terraces are a horrid disadvantage. Once it is dark they may try and rush the hornwork. And the moon's too young to be much use. Lucky Eden had that great bonfire stacked outside. It may come in handy. He's wonderful. Thinks of everything; and as cheery as you please. Who'd have thought it, at Kohat?" He paused, adding suddenly: "It doesn't make you nervous—hearing just how things are?"

"Of course not." Up went her head. "It's much worse not hearing. You imagine things."

"Yes—I know," he said gently. "And somehow one thinks of you—as a soldier."

Her eyes softened and her voice. "I'm so glad. I *am* a soldier. I only wish I could handle a rifle and be some use——"

"Leigh, you're wanted!" Eden's voice interrupted her; and Vincent hurried away.

Before tiffin was over, it had become evident to the merest novice that things would soon be very lively indeed. To the south and west, those yelling multitudes had planted their standards and established themselves in force. Picquet Hill swarmed with them: and from thence they advanced in rushes, opening a heavy fire, to which the Sikhs responded vigorously. Few of their bullets went wide of the mark; but, even with St John's detachment, they barely numbered two hundred rifles. And out there on the ridge, the locust effect increased every hour. Firing into the midst of them seemed about as effectual as killing individual locusts in full swarm.

So thought Vincent, directing operations from the south bastion with a coolness that surprised himself. Suddenly, looking toward the end of the hornwork, he caught his breath. Rolling clouds of smoke and jets of flame, within a few yards of the low wall, revealed that the thorn abattis had been fired. The terraces had evidently enabled a party to creep up under cover

with intent to destroy the hedge that had been converted into a really stout defence. Could those flames be checked? Vincent wondered: and at the same instant heard Eden shouting for volunteers.

It was a task of desperate danger; but he did not need to shout twice. Quick as thought a couple of sepoys, necessarily unarmed, had leaped the wall; and there, under heavy fire at close range, they tore down the blazing portion of the hedge. Even while Vincent stood marvelling, they were back in the hornwork, untouched by the bullets that rained about them; and he joined, with all his lungs, in the cheers that acclaimed a deed of daring worthy of Sikh tradition—which is saying much.

In spite of damage done to the hedge, that incident put fresh heart into the whole garrison, and deeply impressed at least one novice in the art of war. It was the first time he had actually witnessed that splendid disregard of death, at the call of duty, which comes more rapidly to some men, but can be acquired by all men worthy of the name: and it left a lasting mark on his character.

He was privileged to witness it more than once during that most eventful twenty-four hours of his life. For later in the afternoon, smoke and flame reappeared on the opposite side of the work. Again the same two men sprang out, followed by four others in noble emulation of their comrades; and again the fire was stayed without loss of life. Vincent himself was in the hornwork when St John greeted the leaders of that double exploit and promised that their names should be promptly sent up to Headquarters. Simple words and few; but there was a ring in the man's voice that made Vincent feel he would dare much to hear the Colonel speak thus to himself.

So the afternoon wore to evening, and in the minds of all lurked the unspoken thought, "What of to-night?"

The officers snatched hurried cups of tea from two women who cloaked their own anxiety with smiles

and light raillery. Phyllis had her hands full with the children; and very thankful she was for that welcome distraction from thought. Moti, ayah, crouching in a corner, wailed for good, safe India, where *betel* nut and bazaar gossip made life worth living: while Flop had almost to be tied to a charpoy to prevent periodical rushings forth to discover how many Daddy had killed now. Phil, being older and cursed with imagination, already began to feel danger in the air. The incessant noise made his head ache; and a high temperature did not help to steady his nerves.

Thea, alone, in the midst of that ordered activity, felt more and more like a peg without a hole; and when Flop, tired out with excitement, had fallen asleep in defiance of musketry, her last shred of occupation was gone. It was not enough just to help where she could. She wanted 'a definite job'—one that included a rifle for choice—to deaden the haunting fear that harm might come to Vincent before he knew.

This was a judgment on her for indulging that wicked pride of hers: and at last, summoning her courage, she went straight to the hospital and demanded Captain Alton.

He came out, polite but evidently in a hurry. "Mrs Eden, is it?" he asked.

"No—Miss Desmond," she said, with a disarming smile. "Will you let her join your department if Captain Eden gives leave?"

He looked her up and down. "Could she really do it?"

"She could try. Please give her a chance."

"Delighted."

"Oh, thank you!" And she sped away, keeping close under the lee of the wall. For every moment the firing grew heavier; sure sign of increasing numbers without.

It needed patience and dexterity to catch Eden at a leisure moment. But she found him alone at last.

"Captain Eden," she said, touching his arm.

He turned with a start. "Phyllis?" The word sprang to his lips.

"No—no. She's busy with Phil. I've only come to say use me—*please* use me." Her fingers tightened on his arm. "No one could sleep in this pandemonium. And the one thing I can't do is to sit still and listen to it all."

He looked sympathetic but doubtful. "What the dickens *can* you do?"

"Help Captain Alton with our poor hurt men. He says 'Delighted'—if you allow."

"What about Sir Theo?"

"I'm *sure* he'd approve!"

"Know anything about first aid?"

"Not much. Just a few lectures. But I can do what I'm told."

"When it happens to suit your book! You're a sensitive creature. Sure you can stand it?"

"I won't make a fool of myself. Promise," she answered, looking up at him with steady eyes. At that, Eden laid a hand on her shoulder; and remembrance of the last time he had done so came suddenly to them both. "Thea, you're a trump," he said quietly. "I'll take my chance with Sir Theo. Run along and tell Alton, from me, that you're under his orders and he can use you as he thinks fit."

She obeyed him to the letter. Vincent, from his post of duty, could just discern a slim figure in a light dress running like a lapwing close to the sheltering wall; and he wondered, anxiously, what could have happened that she seemed in such a dire hurry to get back to Eden's quarters.

The night was half over before he found out.

But there was no leisure, then, for detailed wonderings. In that pandemonium of yells and rifle fire, his own immediate work kept his nerves sufficiently at strain. The moon set; darkness deepened; the numbers without steadily increased. Would they try to rush the place? That was the danger of the moment, as he very well knew.

Later on, Eden's voice was heard again, above the din, shouting for volunteers. Vincent and his men were close by, and two of them sprang forward, neither knowing nor caring what the task in hand might be. They were Sikhs, both of them: and Vincent—following them up—found that the Colonel had decided to light the great bonfire a hundred yards out. It was his fear that the fiendish yells and beating of tom-toms might be intended to distract attention from mining operations close under the walls.

Here was a task that demanded even greater intrepidity than the saving of the hedge; and St John could not afford to risk many lives in its accomplishment. The two volunteers were bidden to do their work thoroughly, and dismissed with his blessing, amid the cheers of those present.

Darkness was the one asset in their favour. That darkness they must dispel; and the great pile they had to reach, and thoroughly ignite, was in the midst of the enemy. Again it was a task worthy of Sikh daring; and again it was achieved in a manner worthy of the race.

Thea—in a holland overall, stolen from Phyllis—was kneeling beside her first 'own' wounded sepoy, bathing and bandaging his forearm with fingers that tried not to tremble, when the glare of that mighty bonfire startlingly illumined the fort and filled her particular corner with its restless light.

"Oh, what *is* it?" she cried, a note of fear in her voice.

The man explained, in glowing language, the deed of his brother Sikhs; men of his own company, he added with pride: and Thea glowed in response. Alton had been wisely using her, so far, to fetch and carry for him, and help with his cases, that she might grow used, a little, to the sight of pain and blood: for there was no denying that the one hurt her and the other unnerved her. But being impatient of this slow process, she had escaped to a corner where hot firing

promised first-aid experience on her own account; and she was greatly proud of her success.

"Better now?" she asked her patient, who sat propped against a wood stack. "I'll go and report to the Doctor Sahib." And she moved away a space, scanning the shadowy figures, praying for a glimpse of Vincent, who was behind her and had just sighted her himself.

Free for the instant, he hurried forward. "At last!" was his exultant thought.

A stray bullet whizzing past made him jerk backwards hastily. Then—his heart turned over within him. For he saw her sway, heard her startled cry, and springing to her caught her in his arms.

"Thea—are you hit?" he whispered. His voice shook and he hardly realised that he had spoken her name.

"My arm. It frightened me. But it's nothing—to matter." She let her head rest against him with a little shivering sigh and he gathered her close.

"That's not true," he said, a new note in his voice. "You're shivering."

"Only—with joy." The din had subsided a little since the fire blazed up; but still he could scarcely hear her or believe his ears. "Vincent, don't you *yet* understand?"

He had no words to express the fulness of his very belated understanding. But the arms that held her spoke for him and she felt his lips on her hair.

"Come under cover," he said hoarsely. "I must see to your arm."

The sepoy had gone and Vincent dragged the stack into a safer, more shadowed corner, where he propped her up against it.

"Have you a bandage?" he asked.

"Yes. In my apron pocket."

She seemed to be speaking and watching his movements in a dream. Why did he bother about her silly wound, she wondered impatiently, when the whole world had been new-made by the feel of his arms, by that strange sound in his voice.

But Vincent, unbalanced a little, shy of his own emotion and hers, was simply thankful for a chance to render her practical service. Picking up a lantern, he set it down by her and, with tender solicitude, examined her wound. Shadowy figures kept hurrying past, and a fresh outburst of firing made speech almost impossible; but the lantern weirdly revealed their faces to each other, and they could exchange smiles. For Vincent, that sufficed—momentarily. Thea, the ever-impatient, hungered for more.

Very carefully he removed the overall: but when it came to the blouse there was an instant of mutual shyness.

"May I cut the sleeve out?" he asked. "It'll be quicker. I want to stop the bleeding."

"Yes, cut it," she said, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. At that he whipped up her overall, folded it and slipped it behind her head. For a second his hand lingered on her hair; the wonderful, vital hair he had so often longed to touch.

"Tell me if I hurt you—Thea," he said; and she nodded, smiling up at him.

Deftly and quickly, with her medical scissors, he cut away the silk sleeve of her blouse, and again she closed her eyes. The delicate touch of his fingers on her arm was ecstasy; anodyne to the pain of which she only now began to be aware. The wound itself was a clean and simple matter: but the bullet having touched a vein, it was bleeding rather freely. Between that and the shock and her own emotion, she felt a queer dizziness stealing over her, while Vincent bandaged the arm as firmly as he dared and improvised a sling out of his own silk handkerchief.

"That's better, isn't it?" he asked.

"It's lovely." He was kneeling beside her; and the fingers of her free hand shyly caressed his hair. "It's too lovely for anything."

"You wouldn't like a sip of brandy?"

"No—nonsense." Brandy! when she was simply longing to be kissed.

But he was anxiously intent on her safety; and he had yet to learn how to make love. His heart was filled with worship of her: but, "I really ought to take you into Mrs Eden," was all he said.

"I won't be taken. I'm so blessedly happy." A pause. The firing had died down. Things in general seemed quieter. "Vincent—didn't it ever really occur to you——?"

He cleared his throat; why would she make him speak, when he could still hardly take it in? "Well . . . I had my moments of crazy presumption. But . . . there was Howard——"

"Oh, don't! I'm head over ears in shame."

That confession roused him. In sheer amazement he pressed the point. "Thea—I must know. Since when—was it me?"

"I think—since Christmas." Her fingers stole into his and he gripped them hard.

"Wasn't it Howard . . . ever?"

In the lantern light their eyes met, and a tingling shock ran through her. "Must I tell true?"

"Please."

"Well, in Murree . . . it very nearly was. Always, from the first, he fascinated me. I think half of me didn't want to lose him and half of me was afraid of him. And then—he's rather a splendid lover; and I'm afraid I've a weakness—for being loved. But always, at the back of my heart, something was tugging against him. I wouldn't admit it was you; because you didn't seem to care—that way——"

"Oh Lord!" he groaned; and abruptly kissed the fingers he held. "The blind, havering fool I've been."

She nodded with mischief in her eyes. "The blindest, beautifullest fool that ever was! I believe that's half what made me—love you——"

Her voice grew faint, and on the instant his brandy flask was at her lips. "Drink this—quickly," he commanded. "It'll burn But there's not a drop of water handy."

She sipped obediently, once—twice, liquid fire. "There. I'm all right now," she said, blinking and coughing.

But Vincent had lifted the lantern; and the dark stain on the bandage renewed his anxiety. "You're *not* all right. Your wound's bleeding too freely; and those fiends are waking up again. You've got to come in now."

He helped her up; and she stood, swaying slightly, her hand to her forehead. "I'm dizzy. I suppose it's the brandy." And he devoutly hoped it was.

"Look here—I'm going to carry you," he blurted out with desperate determination.

"O-oh! Can you?"

"Can I? It's only—dare I?"

"Please, dare!"

With a shaky little laugh she slipped an arm round his neck; and gathering her up, he almost ran with her across a dangerous bit of ground that lay between them and Eden's quarters. Two bullets whinged overhead. But in that moment they were immune.

"Don't hurry *too* much," she whispered, once they were safe under the wall.

"I must hurry," he said. "It's high time Alton saw to you; and I've been off duty too long."

Outside the quarters, when he paused to set her down, she spoke again. "Take great care of yourself, for my sake—darling."

He tightened his hold, and his laugh had a ring of triumph. "No need to worry about that. *Nothing* could kill me to-night."

Her face was very close to his: deliberately she lifted it to him, and in the darkness he found her lips.

CHAPTER V.

". . . I have her heavenliness to fold
Beyond the senses, where such love as mine
Such grace as hers . . . unite."

—MEREDITH.

ALTON appeared with surprising promptitude; stopped the bleeding; reassured Phyllis, and sternly reprimanded his self-styled subaltern.

"Was I out of bounds?" she asked meekly.

"I should think so, indeed! A nice start you gave me when you vanished. A nice shock, too, when I'm rushing over here for news of you, to see you being carried home by a certain young man."

"O-oh! But—where were you?"

Her rosy confusion was a lovely thing to see.

"Closer than either of you imagined. Two minutes after Leigh had set you down, he charged into me as if he were bolting from a mad bull. I never saw him taken that way before. But being under fire for twelve hours on end *is* rather unsteadying to the nerves! He's probably hanging round now waiting for a bulletin."

"He's *not*," Thea retorted indignantly. "He was in a great hurry to get back."

Alton laughed. "Well, he'll be in greater when I've reassured him about you. As for yourself, you don't look much in need of condolence."

"Quite the reverse!" she admitted, avoiding his eyes.

"Congratulation — is it? Then I'll be the first."

He shook hands with her at some length. "You deserve that I should report you to Eden. But for the present you're my patient. And you'll oblige me by obeying orders, for the next few days at least."

When he was gone, Phyllis got her to bed as speedily as a good deal of laughing and kissing would permit. The noises without had grown fitful; and in five minutes she was asleep.

Alton found no shadowy figure hovering outside Eden's quarters. There had been, it is true, a distracting moment of hesitation; but the scale was turned by a burst of firing into the hornwork, where Afzul Khan was quite competently in command of affairs.

"The Sahib is not hurt?" he asked. "I began to fear."

"No. It was the Miss Sahib," Vincent explained. "Helping one of our men — she was hurt. Not seriously."

"Allah be praised! This is no place for women."

Vincent's agreement was perhaps less heartfelt than it ought to have been; and it only needed a telegraphic message from Alton to complete his absurd, dream-like sense of immunity from death or danger, while that night of nights slowly wore towards morning.

As darkness diminished, the Orakzais could be seen streaming back to their heights; and Vincent—standing alone on the south bastion, in a windless September dawn—felt that never before had he so keenly realised the blessedness of silence and emptiness: born lover of quiet though he was. As for happiness—he had never come within miles of it till to-day. He found himself repeating the familiar words, 'Heaviness may endure for a night; but joy cometh in the morning': and the joy that glorified this particular morning was not limited to those most nearly concerned. The coming of love to a man and woman is as much a part of the whole world's beauty as the coming of spring to the earth. It holds the same eternal

promise of renewal; and the happiness of lovers, like mercy, is twice blest.

Vincent, descending to earth in search of tea, ran into Jerry, looking a little less spruce than usual.

"Lord, what a night!" was his greeting. "But, I say, how's Miss Desmond?"

"Asleep, I hope," Vincent answered with elaborate coolness. "Who told you she was hit?"

"Two reliable informants that I carry in my head!" Vincent's coolness vanished; and Jerry laughed. "Passed quite close to you. Wanted to stop and enquire. But it seemed a shame to intrude. 'Vinx off duty with a vengeance!' said I to myself, said I. Is it a case of congrats. at last, old chap?"

Vincent grew redder than ever. "Confound it all, this isn't Kohat. I thought we'd escape that sort of rot——"

"Well, you *are* an ungracious beast! 'Tisn't rot: it's jolly sincere. I'm envious, too, I can tell you."

Jerry's look and tone were so crestfallen that Vincent had the grace to feel ashamed of himself. "Don't mind me," he said, holding out a hand. "I—I've hardly taken it in yet. Jerry—it's beyond belief."

"Not a bit of it, old chap. I've been believing it for months with the greatest of ease. It's your own blooming modesty that's beyond belief. Come along and shikar *chota hazri*. Mrs Eden's sure to have some going."

Phyllis let him off with a prolonged handshake. St John was mercifully unaware. Eden contented himself with a nod of approval; and Vincent had never liked the man better.

Daylight revealed a landscape practically empty of the enemy: and a couple of men, sent out to gather information, brought word that the Orakzais —discouraged by their failure to rush the fort—would probably keep away altogether, unless and until Afridi reinforcements arrived. A mere trifle of six thousand

tribesmen did not, it would seem, suffice to overwhelm a few hundred Indian troops under four British officers.

"If it's reinforcements they're after," St John remarked to Eden, "two can play at that game. I believe Sir Theo himself reached Hangu the day before yesterday. I'll hurry back to Fort Lockhart and get a runner through to him while the coast's clear."

Eden brightened visibly. "Good business. His name's a holy terror to these people. And we're on half rations already. Miss Desmond might like to send him a line, if you can wait, sir. Just run up to my quarters, Leigh, and ask if she has any particular news for her father!"

Vincent obeyed with exemplary speed; only halting a moment outside to control the trepidation that played havoc with his courage. Last night, in the dark, matters had been comparatively easy: but now——

He found Thea very much awake; regally installed with cushions and rugs in her own camp-chair, and consumed with impatience to see him. She was half afraid that his shyness would make things difficult for them both; and the manner of his greeting justified her fears.

Though Phyllis discreetly vanished, this incredible lover simply held her hand in both his own and stood looking down at her, worship in his eyes. The shyness he had almost conquered seemed to have returned with overwhelming force. Worse still, it communicated itself to her.

At last he put out a hand and touched her bandaged arm. "How is it now?" he asked. "Not hurting any more?"

"Of course not. It's nothing. I told you last night." There was a touch of irritation in her low voice. This first meeting, in daylight, was far more awkward than she could have believed. It was

even a little disappointing. For herself, the simple, straightforward expression of emotion was a thing as natural as breathing; and she did not yet understand that, for him, it was one of the hardest things on earth. Nor did the element of adoration in his love serve to make it easier.

"Vincent!" she said desperately. "*Do* leave off bothering about my wound. We've got much—much—lovelier things to talk about. Haven't we?"

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at talking," he began.

"Well, anyway, you might kneel down by me. You seem so far off up there."

He was on one knee in a moment. It simply had not occurred to him. "Thea—*my* Thea!" he murmured with repressed intensity.

"Yes—your very utterly Thea."

He acknowledged that confession by slipping an arm round the back of her chair and resting his cool cheek against her warm one. There followed another short silence, more satisfactory than the first: but he did not kiss her even now. Simply to be near her, in perfect accord of feeling, was joy and wonder enough. It was the poet-lover again: the innate reluctance to snatch.

Suddenly he remembered his errand; and the Colonel might be in a hurry to go. He turned to speak; and his eyes encountered hers——

How could a man look at her, when she smiled so, and keep his head?

"Oh, I forgot," he said; "Eden sent me to tell you the Colonel's going to try and get a runner through to your father. They believe he's at Hangu. They want him to send up troops and supplies. Eden thought you might like to send a line—if you'd anything special to say."

"Well—have I?" she asked demurely. "*You* haven't done very much saying! You haven't even said—you cared. You've only made *me* say it! And

here I'm taking everything for granted and flinging myself at your head——"

Her old natural torrent of speech dispelled his shyness. He caught at the small, gesticulating hand. "And *I'm* flinging myself at your feet!" he capped her, with such astonishing neatness that she laughed delightedly.

"I wish I had two hands to applaud that! But really—I can't be officially engaged if I've not even been asked! Just to save my self-respect you ought to say, 'Miss Desmond, will you marry me?'"

"Miss Desmond—will you marry me?" he repeated, reddening and not meeting her eyes.

"You don't *sound* as if you wanted me very badly! But that'll do. My cue is to turn away my head and say, 'This is so very sudden. You must give me time. I've always thought of you as a friend——'" She flashed a wicked smile at him. "Then I ask for a week to realise things. And meantime I write and announce it to my father! Pen and paper, please. There's my writing board."

"It can only be a few lines," he said. "I think the Colonel's in a hurry, and we've kept him waiting as it is."

"Well, I can tell it in six words. 'Please, I want to marry Vincent.' But I'm afraid he knew that before!" She paused, looking up at him. "It's *you* that ought to write, you know. But I seem to be cast for all the parts in this show! Just think, too, I've saved you from the Awful Interview.—But this isn't business. And there's that beautiful Colonel tearing his hair."

Vincent put out a hand and shyly touched hers, that was now so amazingly his also. Half sitting on the table, he feasted his eyes on her while her pen flew over the paper as spontaneously as she talked.

"MOST DARLING DADS," she wrote, "To-day I am happiest of the happy. And Vincent's even a lovelier person than I thought he was. *Now* aren't you glad

you gave in to me? Do come up here quick and tell us so! I'm allowed to help Captain Alton a little. And I've got a nice small scratch of a wound, which I'm idiotically proud of. But I'm even prouder of Something Else! And I am *still* your devoted Twin, THEA."

"There! It's a lovely letter. But you mayn't read it!" She sealed and addressed it while talking. Then he rose and put out a hand; but her finger and thumb retained one corner of the envelope.

"If you weren't in such a *violent* hurry, I'd like to tell you a secret before you go."

He hesitated. Conscience was plucking at him to be gone.

"Well—if it's a very short one——"

"It's the shortest in creation. But you must lean down. I can't say it aloud." He leaned down obediently. She slipped a retaining hand round the back of his head, and her fingers moved caressingly while she whispered her secret into his ear.

"It's only—I don't think two people, who are just engaged, ever have a long interview like this without . . . kissing each other once; . . . unless one of them happens to be called Vincent Leigh——"

The last half of her sentence was barely audible; but it brought him to his knees again. Very tenderly, and with a reverence too uncommon in these days, he took her head between his hands and kissed her lips; once, no more. It was not quite like his kiss of last night. It said other things; for a kiss is but an elemental form of speech; and it so deeply moved her that tears started to her eyes. Seeing this, he kissed them also, each in turn: then rose, like a man transfigured, and hurried back to the long-suffering Colonel, dreading a reprimand for delay he felt powerless to explain.

But St John, having been enlightened by Eden, greeted him with his kindliest smile. "Thanks. That's all right," he said. "You've been quicker than

most men would have been, in the circumstances! Keep up to the mark, though you *are* in luck. We've tough work ahead of us." He paused and thoughtfully regarded this subaltern, who had come on so well, in many respects, of late. Then: "You're not the only one in luck," he said quietly. "You can tell Miss Desmond so, with my best regards."

And Vincent would not have missed that particular moment of red-hot embarrassment for many kingdoms.

CHAPTER VI.

"We are in great danger,
The greater, therefore, should our courage be."
—*Henry V.*

SIR THEO DESMOND, at Hangu, with over two thousand troops of all arms, needed no message from St John to apprise him that the Samana garrison was in immediate need of supports and supplies. He knew, as they did not yet, that the discouraged Orakzais were on the eve of being joined by large Afridi forces flushed with success and encouraged by their own particular firebrand, Saiad Akbar—a gentleman well known to Desmond by repute. The Afridi-Orakzai alliance was as formidable as any that the Border could produce—a matter of twenty-five thousand fighting men; and the Afridis, finding the Peshawur region too strongly guarded for their taste, were the readier to join in a big demonstration against the Samana ridge. Already it was rumoured that a *lashkar*,[1] ten thousand strong, had entered the Khanki valley; and their programme—as revealed to Desmond by reliable scouts—was to carry the forts by sheer weight of numbers; raid Hangu, and then, by the favour of Allah, attack Kohat itself. The main business of the Hangu force was to ensure that, as regards Kohat, the favour of Allah should not prevail.

Meanwhile, Desmond had orders from Simla to send a convoy of stores, sufficient for a month, to the Samana garrison and clear the ridge; orders peculiarly welcome

[1] Gathering.

in the circumstances. By heroic measures and sheer force of will, he had succeeded in getting his fever under control; and he intended that it should so remain till Orakzais and Afridis had yielded to the only form of argument they understood. His troops, though seasoned and reliable, were few enough for the task in hand; but on the Border, it is quality against quantity, first and last. St John's message found Desmond girding at transport delays, that were mercifully nearing an end; and his determination to lose no more time communicated itself to the camp through the person of his extra A.D.C., young Paul Desmond, now a cavalry subaltern in his father's old regiment.

Taller and broader than Sir Theo, with his mother's serene eyes and coppery brown hair, and a double heritage of the soldier-spirit in his blood, the boy was a noble specimen of manhood, overflowing with energy and zeal: and at this particular moment, when Desmond was combating physical ills, he blessed his good fortune in possessing a masculine replica of Honor for his right-hand man.

Within a few days of that first attack, he appeared on the Samana with his compact little force; set up his main camp at Fort Lockhart; and the next morning hurried on to Gulistan, with Paul and a handful of troops, including sappers for strengthening the defences.

There, his welcome from the garrison, though sufficiently stirring, was eclipsed by the personal welcome awaiting him in Eden's quarters. Vincent had taken the precaution to write the things that must be said: so there needed no more between them than Desmond's handclasp and quiet aside: "Nothing in the world could please me better, Vincent. I can almost forgive myself—now!"

As for young Desmond, he beamed approval on the new edition of his Sandhurst pal. "Who'd ever have thought, in those old days, that the Hermit Crab and I were booked for brothers!" he remarked genially.

'Very thoughtful of Thea to consider my taste in he matter. Puzzles me, though, how you ever came o do the asking. I rather 'spec she had to do it ierself."

Thea was by now unblushingly established on Desnond's knee; and at Paul's brotherly insult she hid ier face against him. "Dads, why *do* you choose such an objectionable young man for your A.D.C.? Please tell him 'Behave,' or take himself away!"

"Thanks awfully," Paul retorted, unabashed. "Nice sort of welcome for a mere brother! Bags I the bridegroom elect. Come on, Vincent. I can put you up to the real Thea. Save you no end of jars and shocks! If you want a genuine opinion of a girl, her brother's the man to go for."

Linking an arm through Vincent's he went out, eaving the 'Twins' to a happy hour of confidences and nonsense: a mutual private weakness of theirs, acitly recognised by the family.

Next morning the domesticities must needs make way for the more serious business of a reconnaissance towards the Samana Suk, to verify reports of Afridi *lashkars* in that region. Observers on the crest reported some big move in progress—twenty thousand of them, at a rough computation; and thirty standards were counted. For it was a Mullah's war.

Yet all that day and the next they kept well out of range, being quite aware that a brigade of troops could not remain more than forty-eight hours or so on that rocky, ill-watered ridge. It was a distracting position for any General; still more so for Desmond, with his dearest treasure shut up in Fort Gulistan. Their parting, in such circumstances, was the sharpest wrench they had yet suffered; and he returned to Fort Lockhart knowing that he must leave the Samana without seeing her again.

The call for action came even sooner than he expected. Information, brought in by scouts, indicated the probability of a sudden rush on the lightly held village of Hangu and the Kohat road; a move that

must be checked with all vigour and speed. By dusk, the whole of Desmond's little force was ready, to the last pack-mule, for a prompt descent upon a certain police post; at which point, with luck, they could intercept the tribes and save Hangu from attack. Only one British officer and a few men, knocked up by the heat, could be left behind at Fort Lockhart; for, if rumour spoke true, Desmond would need every man available.

"We shall hold our own, sir, whatever comes," St John assured him at parting. "It's you that will have the bulk of 'em either on your hands or planting stings in your tail."

"Let 'em," answered Desmond quietly. "I can trust my Gurkhas for rearguard amenities." Not a word of the thoughts uppermost in the minds of both.

Under a moon more than half full, that long thin line of troops and transport moved cautiously down from the fort and up again to a lesser crest, where they must bivouac till dawn: and scarcely had the advanced-guard reached the hill-top, when a violent outburst of shots, war-drums, and yells announced that rearguard amenities had begun in earnest. Looking backward down the road they had come, the moonlight revealed a nightmare of the wildest confusion: grotesque, erratic shadows of loose camels, maddened by fear and wounds; massed shadows of troops and tribesmen, whose assaults on Desmond's Gurkhas at times assumed the proportions of a rush.

For five anxious hours the unequal conflict raged: but by two of the morning all were safe in camp, with no more than twelve Gurkha casualties, and forty hapless camels stolen or strayed.

After a few hours' rest at that waterless post, Desmond pushed on to Hangu with all despatch. But scarcely had they set out, when a helio from Fort Lockhart announced that the main mass of the tribes

they were pursuing had doubled back on their tracks, in the night, and were already investing the Samana forts. Worse still, St John reported Saraghari and Gulistan hard-pressed.

There could be but one inference. The eastward move had been a clever ruse to draw off the troops and guns; and Desmond's feelings, in that black hour, were as unenviable as any that could rack the mind of a General or the heart of a man.

Troops and transport animals were exhausted for want of water. Until they reached Hangu, not a drop was to be had; and for all his impatience, Desmond knew well enough that a night march back to the Samana, without it, would be a physical impossibility. Moreover, with the enemy still thick as bees in his own region, he dared not leave Hangu altogether in the lurch. Knowledge that he could not, in any case, have remained longer on the ridge failed to mitigate the torment of being forced, by sheer physical need, to push forward, with his strong serviceable body of troops—in the wrong direction.

Paul never forgot his father's face that day. It seemed sternly to repel any kind of hope or fellow-feeling, and he received the order, as it was given, with an unmoved countenance. That order, even troops parched with thirst must have been reluctant to obey; and they reached Hangu at dusk, only to hear that Saraghari had fallen, after a heroic stand against impossible odds, and that the tribes had isolated Gulistan.

For Desmond there could be no question of sleep that night. Exhausted though he was, he lay wide-eyed from hour to hour, his brain haunted by visions of his 'little girl,' with her arm in a sling and twin stars alight in her eyes. If he had erred in yielding to her sweet insistence, his present punishment seemed almost more than he could bear. The very word Hangu was a synonym, ever after, for the torments of hell. Twenty-four mortal hours must be wasted before he could move again: for the return

march must be by night, if he were to catch the tribes unawares; his only chance against an enemy who outnumbered him by ten to one.

But even the most interminable ordeal has its limit: and before dusk, next day, his little force was on the move again—this time in the right direction—carrying only coats, bedding, and light provisions. Speed was the supreme consideration: and that not in Desmond's mind only; but in the mind of every officer and man under his command. For they loved him with a personal love; and they knew that the lives of English women and children hung upon their failure or success.

Already he had despatched along the lower road a signalling party, with four guns and a cavalry escort, to make a diversion from the valley below the fort and flash a message to Eden that he would relieve them the following day. More than this, human power could not do: and the men who climbed the broken path from Hangu, in the wan light of a sinking moon, had but one thought, one prayer, in their minds—"God grant we may arrive in time!"

CHAPTER VII.

"Words are the Daughters of Earth; deeds are the Sons of Heaven."
—*Indian Proverb.*

St John had not exaggerated. Gulistan was not only hard pressed but isolated, till help arrived.

At dawn on the 12th—while Desmond's force was making its way, under difficulties, in the wrong direction—the locust swarm had reappeared on all the heights east and west of the Forts they intended to demolish before that intrusive General Sahib could bring back his guns. Thickest of all they swarmed on the hills near Saraghari; while a few superfluous thousands proceeded to harass Fort Lockhart and Gulistan. First the signalling post between the two must be destroyed: then, communication being severed, the larger posts could be invested and dealt with accordingly.

The fact that all three garrisons consisted mainly of Sikhs added a special zest to their little adventure. For the Sikh and the Pathan are enemies of ancient standing; and when they meet in battle there is no question of quarter given or received. All the sepoys in Saraghari were Sikhs, of Jerry's company: and surrender is not of their creed. The Kalsa race, while it lasts, will glory in the memory of that seven hours' stand—twenty-one against five thousand. But for the fatality of a wooden door and weak flank defences, they might even have held out till Desmond arrived. As it was, their comrades in the larger forts were compelled to watch, with hands tied, the progress

of a heroic struggle which could have but one end: and well they knew that end would never come till every man among them was either dying or dead.

For the first few hours, the surging mass of fanaticism dashed itself, in great concerted rushes, against the little post, like waves against a rock; and with about as much result. Officers and men, at Gulistan, kept anxious watch from the ramparts, in the intervals of repelling lesser attacks designed to hinder any attempt at relief. Soft-hearted Jerry went about his work with a face of tragedy: and Eden—a transformed Eden—sought distraction in the imperative task of completing their own dispositions to the best of their limited ability.

Every available drop of water had been brought in. The outer supply having been cut off, they would get no more till relief arrived. That—as Eden knew—was the really critical factor in the situation: a factor that made a man think in hours and dread even the lightest check to Desmond's returning force. The Sikhs would fight to the last gasp: but let water run out and the last gasp would not be long delayed.

The treasure, guarded by sentries, was placed in Vincent's charge. Eden, by the way, no longer felt doubtful about him; while Vincent had discovered in Eden, the soldier, qualities he had certainly not suspected in Eden, the man. The mere fact that he drank less made his brain clearer, his temper cooler, while freedom from Blake's poisonous influence, and from the chronic jar of living at cross purposes with his wife, reacted on his cheerful, easy-going nature with excellent effect. Hence, a better understanding between himself and Vincent than either had deemed possible six months ago.

It was while they were completing arrangements for their precious water supply that Jerry dashed in upon them, desperation in his round blue eyes.

"Eden, I say, those fiends are undermining the north-west bastion at Saraghari," he announced with a break in his voice. "I can see them through my

glasses. And our fellows haven't a notion what's up. For God's sake, let's signal them a message of warning."

The heroic twenty-one were, in a special sense, Jerry's own sepoys. He knew most of them personally; and many of them he loved.

"Steady, old chap," Eden said soothingly. "We'll try signalling. But there can't be many left now; and they're so hard pressed, I doubt if we can catch their attention."

The event justified his doubt. That message, signalled again and yet again, elicited no response: and all the while those two sinister figures crouched under the bastion, shielded from discovery and from rifle fire by a fatal defect in the construction of the fort. The inevitable end could not, now, be long delayed: and then—it would be their turn next.

Jerry, with glasses glued to his eyes and curses on his lips, saw the undermined angle totter and fall inwards: saw the wooden door hacked down and thousands of turbaned figures scrambling over their own dead and wounded into the serai. What he could not see was that, even there, a stubborn remnant held out, till all were dying or dead; save one solitary sepoy, who locked himself into the guard-room and blazed away at the yelling crowd, till they set fire to the place. And that one unconquerable died a Norseman's death, after killing a Pathan for each of his own dead comrades.

From the Gulistan defences, they saw only a cloud of dark figures swarming over the ruins; dense columns of smoke shot with tongues of flame; and the surging of fresh masses towards Gulistan. From Fort Lockhart no help could reach them. Now that the signalling post was gone, they were as completely cut off from their comrades as though each inhabited a separate planet.

Since dawn, every man of Eden's hundred and eighty sepoys had been at his post: and there they

must remain till the end came, in one way or the other.

It was now half-past four; and Eden lost no time in improvising breast-works across the fatal dead angles of his own two bastions. Already the marksmen on the western hills had made their presence felt in the shape of casualties: and the night that loomed ahead was like to prove more of an ordeal than any of them cared to realise in advance.

The trouble with Vincent was that he could never escape that crippling form of realisation, sharpened now by a new sense of responsibility for Thea, lately returned to duty. But it must be confessed that, as regards this still incredible engagement of his, the trick of too keen realisation failed him curiously. Perhaps his modesty was the stumbling-block, as it had been all along. In any case, the astounding fact that he had dared to take permanent possession of Thea Desmond dawned on him only by degrees. Even now, there were moments when his joy and wonder were tinged with alarm, moments when he was paralysed, as on that first morning, by shyness of her emotion and his own. A man does not escape from the essence of himself merely by taking two resolute steps in the right direction. So, in spite of Thea's delicate hint, there were still 'interviews' when they met and parted without the kiss that she regarded as her right.

On this day of stress and tragedy they had scarcely met since breakfast: but in the evening they had a few moments alone before Vincent went to take up his post for the night. He made her promise that, sleep or no sleep, she would spend at least part of the night in bed; that she would religiously obey orders and not run after first-aid ventures again.

"You see, it isn't fair on your father—or on me," he said, grasping her by the elbows and looking deep into her eyes. "Whatever happens, I can't leave my post. Yet—I am responsible. He entrusted you to me. Be a good Thea—promise!"

"Promise! Saint of a Thea!"

She set her hands palm to palm, in mock submission. But her eyes were suspiciously bright; and freeing her arms, she slipped them round his neck. "You be careful too, mind!" she commanded softly. "Don't go forgetting or sort of not understanding that you *are* rather precious——"

She broke off there, for he had suddenly caught her close, and was holding her, holding her as if he could never let her go——

"God keep you safe—my beloved," he said at last, his lips on hers. "I *mustn't* stay now."

Thea, left alone, dropped into a chair and leaned forward on her elbows, hiding her face in her hands. For many minutes she sat thus, in a concentrated stillness; her whole being uplifted in prayer and praise, intermingled with very human visions of him for whom she gave thanks and prayed. To-night was the first time he had achieved a lover's term of endearment: and to-night the finest word of love's language sang like music in her heart.

Since that first meeting, after their night of adventure, her troublesome pride had whispered occasional doubts as to whether she herself had not precipitated things; whether he were not still a little afraid of marriage, as she suspected he had been all along? But now that he had spoken so and held her so, any further doubt were high treason to Love: now she knew, and gloried in the knowledge, she was all the world to him, even as he to her. Never had she been more entirely her mother's daughter than to-night: and the fact that it behoved her and Vincent, even in their perfect hour, to put greater matters before themselves, gave to this new-found joy a depth and dignity very satisfying to her incurable idealism.

She had leave to help in the hospital till midnight: and slipping on her overall, she went first into the inner room to see if Phyllis needed her. It was a large bleak room, furnished chiefly with trunks and *kilters*, a table and charpoys, lit by a single hand-lamp and

smelling faintly of kerosene. On one of the beds Flop —hardened to strange noises—lay sound asleep, while Moti, shrouded like a corpse in a native blanket, lay beside her on the floor. Phil—who had been three days in bed with fever—tossed restlessly on a crumpled pillow, his hands clapped over his ears.

"Oh, Mummy, all those noises *ache* my head so," he was moaning plaintively as Thea came in. "Why *can't* Daddy tell them to stop?"

Phyllis sat by him on a low wooden box and caressed the hot, damp head. The vagaries of her own temperature had perforce to be ignored.

"Daddy can only stop them by killing all the Pathans, Phil," she explained gently. "And he's killing as many as he can. We must try and be patient till the General Sahib comes with his big guns." She held out a hand to Thea. "Give me that cotton-wool off the dressing-table, darling. I'll put some in his ears. Going to the hospital, are you?"

"Yes; unless I can help."

Phyllis shook her head. "I'll lie down by the poor lamb presently. I may comfort him into a doze."

"Try cotton-wool yourself," Thea suggested, kissing her cheek.

"I have. But it goes on inside all the same. And there's Ted——"

"Vincent says he's splendid. Keeping up every one's spirits; thinking of everything."

"Yes. I've never seen him—like this. It's wonderful Run along now, child, where you can really help. Lucky you. I can only lie here—and pray for Ted."

And how passionately she prayed for him whom she had once come near to leaving for good. Fate had shown small kindness to Phyllis Eden: and her anxiety was intensified by a not unnatural feeling that it would be just like life if he were to be taken from her now.

And while she prayed, officers and men stood at their posts, without thought of sleep, firing coolly,

effectively, whenever the moon or flashes from enemy rifles revealed a likely target; for they had strict orders not to waste ammunition. The volleys from without were many times heavier than their own; and as the night wore on, the Pathans steadily shortened their range. In spite of every precaution, casualties increased; and Alton had real need of such help as his 'subaltern' could give.

Inwardly shrinking, outwardly composed, she waited on him, when he would allow; dressed and bandaged the slightly wounded sepoys; laughing and praising them and showing off, with childish pride, her very fair knowledge of the language. But even while she gloried in her privileges, it needed all her grit and strength of will to spend half the night in that crowded, ill-ventilated room strewn with the bodies of suffering men, who lay about on mats or native rugs; some groaning, some enduring their hurts in a stoical silence that put her own shrinking to shame. And the atmosphere of the place—the mingled odours of blood and humanity, antiseptics and kerosene! She felt as if her nostrils would never be cleansed of it again. Only once, though there were many perilous moments, did she come near to fainting: and through it all, at the back of her brain, lurked the unsteadying thought: "Will it be Vincent next time?"

But though she stuck manfully to her post till one of the morning, that dreaded 'next time' never came.

"If you go on like this, Eden will have to recommend you for a decoration," Alton said, as he parted from her outside the quarters. "Take those tabloids, and you'll sleep. Then I shall be able to use you to-morrow."

She took the tabloids: and—most amazingly—she slept.

Outside, on the battlements and the hill-tops, night wore slowly towards morning: and morning revealed a state of affairs critical enough to discourage the

boldest. Under cover of darkness, large bodies of Pathans had crept up closer and closer, with intent to carry the place by assault before relief could arrive. Skilfully utilizing every terrace and rock and fold of the hill, they had built up a rough line of sangars; and along that line they had planted fifteen standards of defiance.

Eden summed up the general position with soldierly brevity and precision. "Those beggars mean business to-day," he remarked to Vincent, who stood at his elbow. "*We* must get in the first slap at 'em. It's our only chance."

"Do you mean a sortie against all those?" Vincent asked, his lips compressed. To his inexperienced mind it sounded like madness. He had yet to learn the supreme value of audacity in frontier warfare; the value, in all such desperate straits, of the gambler's spirit—dominant in Eden—that will boldly risk everything on a turn of the wheel.

"That's about it," the older man answered confidently. "If they see we've got some kick in us, they'll scratch their heads a bit, and perhaps hold off till to-night. They're no sportsmen, these chaps. A dead cert is their little weakness. And, for us, time's everything.—That's the point to go for." He indicated a group of sangars and standards, twenty yards from the north-west angle of the hornwork. "Now then—scurry back to your post. See that your men keep up a heavy fire to distract the attention of our friends, while I collect volunteers for this job."

Vincent, tired a little with the night's vigil, hurried his men into position and gave the word of command. Most of his sepoys were themselves Pathans, of one tribe or another; and Vincent wondered increasingly whether any compunction lurked in their hearts when it came to close and deadly fighting with their own kind. Especially he wondered about the more recent recruits, like Fuzl Ali Khan, whose set face and eyes glued to his rifle barrel gave no inkling of his private opinion on the subject.

Meanwhile, Eden's call for volunteers had been answered by Havildar Bikram Singh and seventeen men. These slipped cautiously out of the south gateway and crept under the lee of the wall till they reached the critical corner. Then it was, "Fix bayonets—Charge!" A swift rush into the open; a hailstorm of bullets from the sangars. There was nothing for it but to fling themselves face downward, while the hurricane of death swept over them, disabling many and knocking up the dust under the very walls.

It began to look as if Eden's bold stroke would miscarry after all. But a sudden shout went up from the battlements, and Vincent saw twelve more Sikhs, without waiting for orders, fling themselves out of the hornwork, led by his pilgrimage friend Havildar Govin Singh.

For a moment the Pathans slackened fire; and the heroic twelve dashed forward, carrying along with them, in their impetus, the original seventeen——

Now they had reached the sangars. There was a wild confusion of shots and shouts and struggling figures; then an emerging roar of triumph—from the Sikhs. By sheer pace and vigour they had swept an astonished enemy out of his defences; and now, back they came—all that remained of them—waving three Orakzai standards for token of victory.

As they climbed into the hornwork, burdened with their wounded, cheer on cheer crashed out from the battlements of Gulistan.

Thirteen out of the twenty-nine had been hit; among them, the two leaders of the charge, who lived just long enough to know that they had saved the hornwork from an overwhelming assault. It was valiantly done; and though the cost was great, for so small a garrison, it was not unavailing. In war, even the blindest materialist must reckon with the sword of the spirit. Though the argument of lead and steel is admittedly unanswerable, yet, in the last resort, the man who launches that argument counts for more than either: and so it was at Gulistan.

The gallantry of that devoted few was worth a hundred rifles to Eden; and to the Orakzais the loss of three sacred standards was more discouraging than the heaviest death-roll. The three despoiled sections retired in haste to a more respectful distance; but the main body of the enemy still kept up a galling fire at uncomfortably close quarters.

Very soon they had the exact range of all the doors and passages, so that it grew dangerous to move about the hornwork, and casualties increased. Men and officers had stood at their posts for close on twenty-four hours now, and there seemed small hope of relief that day: but the cheerful confidence of Eden, and the success of his bold stroke, upheld their spirits in spite of all.

In the hospital, Alton and his subaltern had their hands full, with a score of wounded men, three of them dying, and water so scarce that little could be spared for the bathing of wounds. It was here that Thea and Vincent snatched their first glimpse of each other, about midday, when Vincent looked in to take leave of his friend Govin Singh. He found the brave fellow far more concerned for the fate of the fort, than for the minor consideration that he would never see India or his own people again. When all was said, he had captured a standard and tasted the joy of battle; and the Sirkar could be trusted to deal generously with his wife and sons.

It was Vincent's first experience of death and wounds at close quarters, and his sensitive shrinking was scarcely less than Thea's own. She was more completely mistress of herself this morning; and it needed only Vincent's unconcealed admiration to crown her joy in the knowledge that she, too, was taking a share in the heroic defence of Gulistan.

Vincent's own feeling was that he would rather spend twenty-four sleepless hours at a post of danger than in the reeking atmosphere of wounded sepoys. But talk was impossible. They could only clasp hands. And it was "Sure you can stand this?" from

Vincent: and "Do take care of yourself," from Thea. But, at the door, Alton had a word for Vincent to cheer him on his way.

"She's splendid. Her father 'll be a proud man when I get a few minutes alone with him. I'll send her on some errands later, to give her a change."

"No risks," Vincent pleaded, and Alton smiled. "You can trust me," he said. "I know about how much of this she can stand."

An hour later, he accepted her offer to run an errand for him to the hornwork bungalow. Her need was evident for relief from sights and sounds sufficiently trying to his own hardened nerves.

"There are two of my fellows in the bungalow," he added. "Went off again the minute their wounds were dressed. No holding 'em now! One's got his shoulder bandaged; the other his head. You might look them up. See if they've got water, and give 'em these for me. Opium pellets. Fine things at a pinch. No larks, mind! Keep under cover when you're moving about."

Thea's eyes danced. "I'll be horribly careful," she promised. Then, with relief unspeakable, she hurried out into the September sunshine and clean mountain air. Even now she found it difficult to believe in danger, though rifles sputtered viciously within and without, and stray bullets hummed through the air. In the hornwork, things were livelier still; but she reached the bungalow intact, and found Alton's wounded men—one prostrate for the moment, the other at his post. At sight of the pellets their eyes gleamed greedily. Water was good, but opium was supreme; and she carried back to the "Doctor Sahib" their "*Bahut bahut salaam.*"

But in spite of strong positions and overwhelming numbers, the tribes still seemed mercifully indisposed to try conclusions at close quarters: and just before sunset came the crowning event of the day.

A report of helio flashes from the Miranzai valley brought Eden and Vincent to the signalling post at

the double. Eden, who had kept up so brave a heart, found the flashes blurred a little; but the signaller's eyes were clear. The General Sahib and his troops were starting that night. Gulistan would be relieved next morning. And, as if to confirm that blessed assurance, the shuddering boom, boom of good British guns, came unmistakably to their ears.

"They can't come up that way, you know," Eden explained to Vincent, and his voice was not so steady as he could have wished it. "It's just a diversion to encourage us and put the other beggars off the scent. Good ruse of the General's. It'll draw off a lot of 'em towards Shinwari and we'll have a quieter night of it." He let out a great breath. "Send word round all the posts, will you? I must go and tell the wife."

He found her alone for a wonder, enjoying a brief rest, by order of Thea. In a general way he had come to take her fragile aspect for granted. But a wave of strong feeling quickens perception; and his heart contracted at sight of her lying in his camp-chair limp and colourless with closed eyes. She must have been half asleep, for he was quite near her before she started and looked up.

"Ted, what is it?" she asked, and would have risen, but he sank on one knee and laid an arm across her.

"Keep quiet, old girl," he said tenderly. "You look done to death. But the end's in sight, thank God. A helio from Miranzai. The General's starting to-night. They'll be here to-morrow. Listen—those are *our* guns in the valley."

She listened—and the blood stole faintly back into her cheek. Never had she heard diviner music—true musician though she was—than that deep, deliberate thunder. Then her fingers closed upon his arm.

"Oh, Ted—to-morrow! But there are such thousands of them."

He smiled. "A few thousand Afridis won't hinder the General much—on a job of this sort! If he says to-morrow, you can bet your last button it'll *be* to-

morrow. It may be late. But we'll hang on somehow. You can rely on us."

At that she put up her other hand, and drawing his head down to hers kissed him with quiet fervour. "I wonder if you've any idea," she said, "how much we all rely on you these days——"

"Oh, rot!" he began with good-humoured impatience; but she was not to be put off.

"There'll be decorations for this," she insisted, grasping his shoulder and smiling into his eyes. "And oh, Ted! I'm proud of you—ever so proud——"

He frowned and shook his head.

"Darling, it's true. You *must* let me say it, this once. All these years I've been too ready to criticise. I've spoilt everything——"

"Spoilt me, you mean!" he said, his face softening. "Criticise or no, you've been the making of me, Phil; if that's any consolation for the rough time I've given you."

Stooping, he kissed her passionately; then sprang to his feet. "I must be off again. Tell Thea. The news 'll cheer our splendid fellows no end——"

Perhaps only soldiers, who have been so circumstanced, can gauge the effect of that message on wounded, thirsty, and sleepless men, who had kept their posts for close on thirty hours without relief or rest. Moreover, the effect of those guns in the valley was precisely what Eden, and Desmond, had foreseen. Swiftly and surreptitiously, large bodies of tribesmen hurried down to intercept an imaginary force; and while they so disported themselves, Sir Theo Desmond was hurrying his little army back up the road to Fort Lockhart as fast as men and guns and animals could go.

CHAPTER VIII.

"She is steadfast as a star
And yet the maddest maiden;
She can wage a gallant war
And give the peace of Eden."
—GEORGE MEREDITH.

THEA slept the greater part of that night, confident in her father's power to disperse the fiends who still unremittingly yelled and fired without. Even Phyllis slept a little, with the help of Alton's tabloids and cotton-wool. But for officers and men there could be no thought of sleep yet; though their eyelids were heavy with it and their lips parched for lack of water. To the little that still remained the wounded had first claim; and there were nearly thirty now on Alton's hands.

Very early in the morning Thea joined him—quite competent, now, and controlled; eager for any amount of work, after six hours of sleep.

"By the time it's all over," she said, rolling up a pair of blood-stained puttees, "I shall really be worth something in the shape of a hospital assistant!"

"I could give you a fairish 'chit' now, without perjuring myself," Alton answered, with more than mere approval in his eyes. "Your name will certainly go up for a decoration, if my word carries any weight with the General."

"Oh, nonsense! Please don't! I was only so proud you let me. And I've done simply nothing."

"That's for others to judge. You've been a real

blessing to me, and the way you ran about yesterday under fire——"

"May I run about again to-day?" she cut him short eagerly. "If you've got decorations on the brain, I'd better do a little more to deserve one, while there's time."

"Well—we'll see! You can start on Fuzl Ali there. He's just come in. Be very sparing with the water. Seems hard on the poor beggars, but it can't be helped."

While she was busy with her patient, Jerry ran in. A bullet had smashed his wrist-watch and grazed his arm. He thrust it at Alton, his coat-sleeve turned back, his shirt soaked with blood.

"Clap a rag on, will you," he said, with a nod of greeting for Thea. "It's making such a deuce of a mess or I'd be ashamed to come in for a scratch, when three of my fellows are hanging on over there in spite of being hit. Not a mite of use telling 'em to go and report themselves. They know a deal more about this game than a chit of an infant like me. And their manner most respectfully implies the same."

He went on talking rather rapidly, wincing in parenthesis, while Alton manipulated his scratch. "The brutes must have discovered Miranzai was a fraud. They're swarming all over the shop. Eden reckons ten to twelve thousand of 'em. Goodness knows why they don't set to and swamp us. Waiting, p'raps, till we've less kick in us. *Let* 'em wait!—Thanks, old chap. Very neat job." And with a friendly wave of his hand he hurried back to duty.

It was not long before Thea followed him, having won leave from Alton to seek out the men who would not report themselves, and give them what relief she could. It meant going down to the hornwork again. There cover was scarce: and to reach Jerry's post she must run the gauntlet of a livelier fusillade than any she had encountered yesterday. Under the lee of a bastion she halted; not fearful, but strangely excited, and praying that Vincent might be well occupied else-

where. Then, at the first lull in the firing, she sped into the open.

But the lull was deceptive. Very soon two bullets whizzed startlingly close to her head. A third passed under her arm; and on reaching safety she found two holes in her overall, which she decided to mend carefully before returning to hospital.

She spent half an hour or so attending to the men, whose gruff attempts at gratitude were full and sufficient reward for any small risks she had run. Then Jerry discovered her, and had no difficulty at all in voicing his admiration.

"Simply stunning of you," he said. "Never dreamed my casual remark would bring you all this way. Rather jumpy business crossing the hornwork wasn't it? Vinx would have a fit if he knew."

She laid a finger on her lip. "Vinx mustn't know. And I must hurry back."

In spite of remonstrance, Jerry insisted on seeing her across the dangerous zone; and as she hurried past Vincent's bastion—another danger zone—a Havildar came out, supporting a sepoy, shot through the body. The sight brought her to a standstill. This was her work. Not for the world would she neglect it. And while she stood asking questions, proffering help, Vincent himself appeared in the doorway.

At sight of her his face lightened as if a sunbeam had flashed across it. "Good morning," he said. "Where are you off to?"

"The hospital," she answered, relieved at the form of his question. "Can't I help, first, with this poor fellow?"

Vincent looked doubtful. "I'm afraid he's rather bad. He ought to be in Alton's hands as soon as possible. But I can't spare the men to take him."

"Well, if the Havildar can run up for two orderlies, I'll stay and do what I can. I've a little weak brandy and water left in my flask. The Havildar might mention I'm safe with you, so that Captain Alton shan't think I'm mislaid! Then *you* must go back to your

own duty, please; or I'll report you to Captain Eden!"

She was on her knees now by the sepoy, who groaned and writhed in the dust, while she administered brandy and did her inadequate best to staunch the flow of blood.

Vincent, ignoring his own conscience and her command, simply stood regarding her with the look of speechless worship that she was growing to know and love. It was his way of expressing what the average man would have expressed in kisses, that were still rare events in their intercourse.

Then, suddenly, he jerked up his head and a listening look came into his eyes.

"Vincent, what is it?" she asked; but he only had ears for that far-off, intermittent sound.

"There—can't you hear it? There! Guns—*our* guns! Not from the Miranzai now. Listen!"

Thea sprang up and listened, till it came again—the deep, commanding voice that spelled reprieve. In the joy of it she almost forgot her wounded man. He was quieter now; and she was thankful to see the hospital orderlies hurrying up.

As they carried off their burden, she turned to her lover with shining eyes. "Vincent, *when* will they be here?"

"I wish I knew. They may have some stiff fighting first; but it's good enough to know they're on the ridge." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "Ten past nine. If they're anywhere near Fort Lockhart we ought to see something from the bastion soon."

"How splendid!" She stepped nearer, and her shoulder almost touched his arm. "Darling—couldn't you take me up for a wee while?" she said in her most caressing voice. "Or would Captain Eden furiously rage? After all, I'm part of the garrison!"

Vincent's hesitation was short-lived. He had seen so little of her lately, and there were still moments when her nearness unsteadied him strangely. "I think we'll chance it. Come on," was all he said.

Once inside the bastion, they took hands like children, and climbed the rough stairway, Thea always a step ahead.

On the last one she turned and set both hands upon his shoulders. "Listen—again! It's almost too good to believe. And it's lovely of you letting me come up."

Her glowing face was very close to his, and taking it between his hands he drew it closer still. "Not much question of letting!" he said. "It's lucky you were born good as well as beautiful, you blessed one; for no living man would have a chance against you: which I'm trusting Eden will understand."

Remembering a certain incident, her eyes twinkled. "I think it's just possible he may!" Then she sprang swiftly away from him; for Afzul Khan, hearing footsteps, appeared in the opening.

"*Hazúr*, come quickly. There is a sight to lift the heart. Smoke of bursting shells on Saraghari heights. And they run, the Orakzai-*lóg*, like ants from a broken ant-heap." Then, his eyes being adjusted to the semi-darkness within, he acknowledged Thea's presence with a profound salaam. "The Miss Sahib will rejoice to see how the Sirkar's enemies obey the General Sahib's orders! She also is a soldier of the great Queen. Did I not see her, even now, running among bullets from the hornwork?"

Vincent turned on her sharply. "Thea—is that *true?*"

Though his voice was repressed, the blue light in his eyes startled her and brought a rush of colour to her cheeks.

"Yes—I had to," she said with a challenging lift of her head.

Afzul Khan, perceiving friction—and shrewdly suspecting jealousy where such beauty was concerned—discreetly withdrew; and Vincent went on: "Whatever was Alton thinking of?"

"Wounded sepoys, naturally. I'm his assistant. It was right and necessary."

"Was it right and necessary not to tell me?"

He was hurt as well as angry, and her lids fell. "I'm sorry. I meant to—afterwards. I only thought —not to worry you now, because I might have to go again.—But, oh *dear*, don't let's squabble over a trifle when such big things are happening." She went quickly past him to the doorway and he followed without a word.

Outside, he took her by the arm and led her to a sheltered corner, whence she had a fine view over the rugged country toward Fort Lockhart, where dust-coloured figures crowded thick as hiving bees. And while she looked, there blossomed on the horizon a greyish-white flower of death; another and another—soaring, hovering, melting into the blue.

Before they melted, there followed the thunder of bursting shells. The General Sahib giving his orders. She liked Afzul Khan's phrase, and instinctively glanced up at Vincent to share her feeling with him. But his eyes were intent on that blossoming horizon, and his face had its closed-up look that checked the impulsive speech on her lips. It was a new and distinctly unpleasant sensation. She was used to quick, passionate natures, like her own. That sort of thing she understood. The other was apt to get upon her nerves. Dimly she began to perceive that silence may be a more powerful weapon than speech. Worse still, she found it horribly infectious. She wanted to speak, to tell him he was really being rather foolish. But the words refused to come——

A Havildar hurried up and saluted. Vincent gave the man an order and turned quickly to Thea. "Don't stir till I come back," he said, a note of command in his voice. "You're perfectly safe, and you've an excellent view.—I can rely on you?"

That question checked her melting mood. "Naturally," she said, looking out across the hills that had become annoyingly indistinct. It was all too silly for anything: but between her exciting run to the hornwork and the sound of her father's guns, she felt strung up, not quite herself; and it was unfair of Vincent to

make a mountain out of the veriest molehill. She had not dreamed that she could ever feel afraid of her shy and rather backward lover. But this new Vincent, with the blue light in his eyes and the tone of command in his voice, produced sensations in her for which she certainly did not love him the less. She was annoyed with him, merely, for spoiling her beautiful adventure and distracting her thoughts from bigger things.

No more tears were allowed to gather: and when Vincent returned, she was absorbed in watching the miraculous effect of British guns on hills alive with well-armed men. The look that returned her shy smile of greeting was the look she knew and loved. She could feel the change in him, though he simply stood beside her as before: and without a word she slipped her fingers into his hand. It closed on them so vigorously that she drew in her lower lip with a small sound, and he turned to her at once; quite another light in his eyes.

"Thea—did I hurt you?"

"A very nice kind of hurt," she answered softly. "Not like—when you went away."

He frowned. "I'd no business to say that. You must forget it."

"I'm afraid, if you want me to forget—those kind of things, you mustn't say them!"

"Then *you* mustn't give me horrid frights."

"It was Afzul that gave you the fright," she reminded him meekly. "I only tried to save you from it, and got badly jumped on for my pains! I suppose—I ought to be running back now."

He glanced at his watch. "It's nearly ten. Have you had any breakfast?"

"I don't seem to remember any. I had some *chota hazri*—about a week ago!"

"Well, look here, go straight back to the bungalow, and eat a good meal before you do another stroke of work. That's an official order, mind, as much as any of Alton's! Come along. I'll just see you down those stairs."

Inside the opening, where they had a moment of privacy, he turned and caught her in his arms, crushing her to him with a vehemence that told her plainer than words what he had suffered from his fright.

At the lower entrance they parted in a lighter vein.

"Shall *I* tell Captain Eden about the unauthorised adventure?" she asked, "or leave it to you?"

"Leave it to me. I wish I could see you all the way there."

"Well, you can't. So you've *got* to rely on me!" she retorted with a wicked twinkle, and ran off at full speed.

Vincent, having watched her out of sight, went back to his post in a state of rapt exaltation. Knowledge that he had been so near to losing her, reawakened, with peculiar intensity, that amazing sense of the possession of another—the joy, the wonder, the responsibility of it—which comes only to those who love with every faculty of being, and still divine inexhaustible depths beyond. And this new privilege of responsibility, though tinged with awe, no longer unnerved him as in Kohat days. He saw it, now, as a natural part of that salvation through action, which he had deliberately chosen, with such blessed and astonishing result. He no longer felt crippled by the fear of living; and that fear being conquered, others might well share the same fate. The star that had dropped from heaven into his heart was slowly diffusing its radiance throughout the whole man. In his bearing, in his tone, in the colour of his thoughts, the change was becoming as apparent to others as to himself. It needed but the end of this grinding strain and struggle to make life—that once forlorn adventure—seem a marvel and a fairy tale almost too good to be true.

CHAPTER IX.

> "One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,
> To strive . . . and not to yield."
>
> —TENNYSON.

LOUDER and nearer, louder and nearer, boomed the steadily advancing guns. By noon, Saraghari was clear of Afridis and Orakzais. From Gulistan, they could be seen streaming down the northern slopes: and when, at last, Desmond's skirmishers appeared upon the sky-line, every man who could stand, wounded or no, sprang to the parapets and fired volley on volley into the retreating foe.

No need, now, for the husbanding of ammunition which Eden had instilled into all ranks.

"Let the devils have it hot! Smite them to hell!" he shouted from his post on Vincent's bastion, whence he could feast his eyes on the rout of ten thousand by eighteen hundred; while the iron fingers of anxiety relaxed their grip on his heart.

These last few days had been hard for all; but for Eden — husband, father, and keeper of another man's child—the strain had been the most purgatorial experience he had known, or ever wished to know again. Yet none, except Phyllis, had seen him other than cheerful and confident of the issue. That the defence had been a creditable achievement he knew very well. What he did not perceive—and probably never would — was the effect wrought, by purgatory and achievement, on that shadowy, half-realised thing,

his own soul. Some men there are, the elect few, who rise readily to the height of their natures. But the average man needs the belabouring of circumstance to strike out the spark of his divine origin: and in this past week, Eden, the brave and resourceful soldier, had emerged from Eden the casual, pleasure-loving man, as he would never have done in years of peaceful service.

But such psychological niceties concerned him not at all. With field-glasses at his eyes, he stood by Vincent watching the swift and welcome changes in the view below.

"By Jove, our fellows are leading 'em!" he cried suddenly. "Howard—the Colonel! They'll be here for tiffin as sure as I'm alive!" He lowered his glasses and turned to Vincent, who was smiling vaguely at the landscape. "Hope they'll bring some drink with 'em. I could put in half a dozen pegs without turning a hair. I vote we have the survivors of our sorties drawn up at the gate with the three standards they took. It would please them no end. I've told 'em already that every man's name will go up for the Order of Merit, and I hope our casual Government won't take six months thinking it over. As for you, Vinx, I've some remarks to make about you that your Mother 'ud give a deal to hear."

Vincent reddened furiously. Praise from Eden was the finishing touch. "I—really I've done precious little," he said. "And—by the way, I let Miss Desmond come up here for half an hour to see the shells bursting. Of course I'd no business to——"

Eden fairly burst out laughing. "Lord, what a chap you are! Want me to tell that to the General too? When will you learn to call her Thea, eh? I'm glad you gave her a sight of things. She deserved it. Just go and make the *bundobust*, will you, for my little show. I want 'em all there; even the chaps in hospital."

Vincent lost no time in carrying out the pleasantest bit of work that had fallen to him for many days. It

was a capital idea of Eden's, and the men's childish delight over it was good to see. Several were still in hospital, and thither he went in search of them.

He found Thea at her post, very much occupied with his wounded Pathan from the bastion—a serious case. She was enthusiastic over his errand, and Alton indicated two unhopeful-looking bundles at the farther end of the room.

"We could help them to the gateway at the last minute, poor fellows. I had three more in here an hour ago; but they managed to sneak out when my back was turned. My orderly will run them to earth for you." He yawned and stretched extensively. No man in the defences had worked harder. "*I* shan't be sorry to take a few hours off this business," he said. "The state of the fort would breed disease if we had to endure it much longer."

But the call for endurance was over. By one o'clock the last lingering Afridis had drawn off to the Samana Suk, and familiar uniforms were streaming along the rough path from Saraghari: guns, cavalry, infantry, transport, all in high fettle, though they had marched near twenty miles, since midnight, and been in action three times.

And ranged outside to greet them were the survivors of those who had turned the scale of things, by a double deed of gallantry, and upheld the finest fighting traditions of the Indian Army. All who could stand were on their feet: but there were many who could not. Bandaged and blood-stained, blackened with gunpowder and parched with thirst, there was little of the heroic in their aspect, much of it in their hearts; and they asked no better reward for valour than the cheers of their brothers in arms and the coveted Order of Merit from the Sirkar.

Before them were drawn up the four British officers, Thea, Phyllis, and the children, all bearing unmistakable marks of hardship stoically endured. The presence of women and children in the picture gave it a poignancy and pathos it would not otherwise

have had for seasoned soldiers; and Desmond thought no shame of the tears that started at sight of his Twin in her blood-stained overall, paler than her wont, with dark smudges under her eyes. Personally, in the matter of anxiety and strain, he himself had endured as much as any one within the walls of Gulistan.

There were cheers on both sides as he and St John alighted and shook hands with the little group. And when it came to Thea, if Desmond had a second's hesitation, she had none. There, before them all, she flung her arms round him and hid her face against his coat. Close and long he held her, but neither could utter a word: and when he gently put her from him, her smile was rainbowed with tears.

"Better take her in, Vincent," he said, transferring her to her lover.

But she laughed and shook her head. "Nonsense, Dads. I'm all right. I *won't* be purdah at such a glorious moment. Besides," she added under her breath, "the poor darling would rather fight a hundred Afridis than sort of lead me to the altar in front of all this crowd!"

Sir Theo laughed. It was pure joy to hear her nonsense again after the nightmares of the last twenty-four hours. "*Hazúr ki kushi*,"[1] he said; and passed on to congratulate, in person, every man of that heroic group by the gateway.

Thea gave one hand to Howard and the other to Paul, who beamed on her with dignified aloofness, intended to discourage further public demonstrations. Howard's demonstration, though not public, was eloquent enough to make her a little nervous lest Vincent should notice how long he held her hand and how his intent gaze lingered on her face. He too had suffered from nightmares—unauthorised, but acute.

"Best congratulations—all round," he said; adding, for her private ear: "Quite satisfied now, are you?"

[1] Your Honour's pleasure.

Her glance reproached him for pressing the point; and as she turned eagerly to Paul, Howard shook hands with Vincent, whom, for all his smothered jealousy, he could not succeed in liking the less.

"You *are* a lucky devil, Vinx," he said, speaking his thought with characteristic directness. "Lord knows how you managed it."

"It's more than I do," Vincent answered, reddening, as much on Howard's account as on his own. "*You* must have had an anxious time at Fort Lockhart," he added quickly.

"Yes. It was pretty sickening, being held up so that we couldn't lift a finger, except for one desperate sortie, just before Saraghari fell. We thanked God, I can tell you, every time we heard the crack of your rifles. Never saw the Colonel so upset. One kept thinking—of the women."

"They've been splendid; both of them."

"They would be. At our end, the Afridis chiefly amused themselves with sniping, just to keep us quiet. Nearly spoilt our little plan for going out to give Sir Theo a hand up. But in the end we risked it; and wasn't he jolly glad to see us? He was hustling 'em all without mercy. Only one thought in his head—Gulistan. I'll never forget his face, when the guns were sweeping the enemy off Saraghari, like dust before a broom. I can tell you our Sikhs wanted something more bloodthirsty than shrapnel when they reached the place, and saw their own people hacked in pieces, like butcher's meat, mutilated—" Howard shuddered. "Pray you may never see the horrors we saw this morning," he added gravely. "Now I must go and have a word with Eden and that plucky wife of his."

After Howard, followed Maclean, Finlay, and a dozen others. The air was full of laughter and congratulations and the peaceful clatter of cavalry and guns. What the chastened Pathans, still massed on the western peaks, thought of it all, no one knew or cared: and the tiffin that followed, in the largest room

available, was a feast of good cheer in every sense of the word.

Sir Theo, with Phyllis on his right hand and Thea on his left, was another being altogether than the General who, for the last forty-eight hours, had seemed to his officers less a man than an incarnate purpose. There was an endless deal, on both sides, to hear and to tell. There were healths to drink; for the force had not arrived empty-handed; and, in the huge relief that was on them all, they were ready to shout themselves hoarse on the slightest provocation.

When smoking and shop were in full swing, the two women rose to go: and a score of men, rising also, cheered them as they went. Phyllis' head was buzzing, her pulses throbbing. For her, there was real danger in the reaction, however welcome; and the strain of that noisy, cheerful meal had unnerved her altogether. Alone in her room, with Thea, her fine self-control went suddenly to pieces. Tears streamed down her cheeks; and flinging herself on the bed, she lay helpless, convulsed by long shuddering sobs.

Thea, startled and dismayed, knelt beside her, crooning words of love, fearful lest her brain had given way, just when all was over and there seemed no reason in the world for anything but gratitude and joy.

Nor was her fear allayed when that strange, shaken Phyllis, clapping her hands over her ears, cried: "They're coming back! I can hear them! Oh God, keep him safe—Ted, my Ted!"

"Precious one, they're not coming. They've gone—absolutely gone," she insisted, her own voice breaking. "Shall I call—Ted?"

She ventured the name hoping it might catch Phyllis' attention: and it did. "No, no," she said in a more natural voice. "He has enough anxiety—"

"But, darling, that's over. Don't you understand? It's our own troops you hear. We're safe—all of us."

Phyllis let out a long breath and her lids fell

heavily. "Yes, yes. I forgot. If they'd only keep quiet for an hour, I believe—I could sleep."

Thea, infinitely relieved, stooped and kissed her. "That's splendid; I'll cover you up." And before she had finished her ministrations the steady rhythm of Phyllis' breathing assured her that all was well.

In the sitting-room she found her father and Captain Alton; and to them she poured out her tale.

Alton received it with a cryptic nod. "I didn't like the look of her at tiffin," he said. "She's in a very shaky state of health. Send for me when she wakes. But I hope she sleeps the clock round."

Desmond looked distressed. "She's been out five years on end. She ought to have gone home with my wife. But we couldn't make her see it. That's how her sort are made. Taken all round, the record of some of our English wives in India would make as fine a chapter as any in our history. Here's the latest candidate," he added, slipping a hand through Thea's arm. "And I hear she's been distinguishing herself already."

Thea laughed and shook a fist at Alton. "Don't attend to his nonsense, Dads! Come to the hospital and see our wounded and my very special friends."

"It was for that we came to fetch you," Desmond answered. "You can leave the rest to Alton and me!"

On the way to the hospital he sniffed critically more than once. "We must get you and Phyllis out of this pestilential hole to-morrow, and on to Kohat directly the coast's clear. Finlay has put his bungalow at my disposal." A small sigh from Thea greeted this announcement. "You don't seem properly grateful, little girl? Surely you've had enough of a real live fort to last you a lifetime?"

"I'll never forget it—if that's what you mean," she answered very low; and Desmond's eyes lingered on her face.

"No more shall I," he said gravely. "I've just been treated to Mother's opinion on the subject of my utter

incompetence to manage her headstrong daughter. I must send her a wire to-morrow, when our communications will be in working order again. This isn't the end of things, you know. It's only the beginning of the biggest business we've had in this part of the world since the Afghan War. And *I'm* to boss the whole show. D' you realise that?"

Her face lit up. "Dads—how splendid! And of course I stay out here too?"

"I presume so.—Delighted is she?"

"Delighted!"

"That's a blessing! Now she shall introduce me to her very special friends."

In that rough-and-ready hospital there were forty-one wounded, many with small hope of recovery; and to each man Desmond spoke a few words of encouragement and praise, coupled with the coveted assurance that the services of none would be overlooked by the Sirkar. Then, before the bulk of his men returned to camp at Fort Lockhart, he issued to the assembled troops a stirring "Force Order," extolling the gallant defence of both forts, and promising to send up, at once, the names of those most distinguished for valour: an announcement greeted with cheers.

It was then that Eden asked leave to present, for special mention, the three British officers to whose ability, energy, and endurance he owed more than he could say; and one after another Sir Theo shook hands with them, to the tune of further cheering from all ranks. But Eden had yet another candidate for honours: and this time it was Thea he brought forward on his arm.

"May I be allowed, sir, to present Miss Desmond," he said with an unmoved countenance, "as being worthy of her Majesty's particular recognition, not only for good service rendered in hospital but for attending the wounded under fire at great personal risk. I know I speak for every one of us when I say that we have all been the better and the cheerier for her presence in the Fort."

Thea, shaking like a leaf, kept her gaze steadfastly on her father's face; saw the faint change of colour, the flash of pride in his eyes; and it needed only that to crown the finest adventure of her life.

"Take me back *quick*," she whispered to Eden as cheer upon cheer rang out. But Desmond was speaking now; and Thea, while she listened, treasured every word to tell Phyllis afterwards. For it was Eden's turn to receive the recognition due to him as organiser and leading spirit of the defence.

He went brick-red under those amazing encomiums from his wife's cousin, who had hitherto treated him with little more than friendly toleration for Phyllis' sake: while Thea who had rounded on him so fiercely last cold weather, was intimating her approval by an occasional pressure of his arm. Finally Sir Theo bade them give "three cheers for Eden Sahib," and there went up a deafening roar from all ranks.

It was all very gratifying and rather bewildering; for Eden's brain moved slowly, though he could be swift in action. When his brother officers crowded round to shake hands with him, he scarcely heard what they said; and answered them—he knew not what. Only one clear thought penetrated the pleasing confusion of things: Phyllis ought to have been there. She would be bitterly disappointed at having been out of it; in fact, it was a wonder she hadn't appeared by now. They had made a noise enough to wake the dead.

But Phyllis, with her face pressed into her pillow, slept soundly through it all.

CHAPTER X.

"The night was dark when she went away,
and they slept.
The night is dark now and I call for her.
. . . . . .
Those that used to play are playing still,—
so spendthrift is life."

—RABINDRANATH TAGORE.

As the sun drew toward the western peaks that evening a great quiet fell on Fort Gulistan. The main column under St John had gone back to Fort Lockhart, leaving Finlay's regiment and two mountain guns to swell the garrison. Desmond himself had decided to remain also and join his force next day with the women and children, and wounded, destined for Kohat.

And now, while the glamour of evening transfigured all the harsh, unbeautiful landscape, he was strolling with Vincent and Thea outside the walls that for ten days had been the boundary of their world.

The utter silence and emptiness around them, still seemed strangely unreal; a mask of stillness, veiling some sinister design. But Desmond, inured to the magically swift dispersal of these mountain warriors, laughed at their fears.

"We administered a dose of shrapnel this morning," he said, "that will act as a sedative and give us time to repair our communications, and get all you ineffectives safely down to Kohat."

"Ineffectives!" Thea wrinkled her nose at the obnoxious word. "It sounds one door removed from

an imbecile; and it's mean to call us names because we can't fight. I beg to state that only this morning I was effective enough to earn my first real scolding from Vinx, though he *does* look as if he couldn't scold a fly!"

Desmond laughed. "Well done, Vinx! I'm glad he has the moral courage to scold you. It's more than I've ever had. And if your effectiveness doesn't earn you the Royal Red Cross——"

"Dads—are you joking?"

"Not a bit of it. You wait and see; though you may have to do a good deal of waiting before you see. 'That's England's little way of doing business.' But I hope St John's splendid fellows get their Orders of Merit double quick."

So their talk drifted naturally to the future and to the troops that were gathering at Kohat for a big campaign, designed to punish the Afridis for breach of faith and unprovoked aggression, by 'lifting the purdah' of their sacred Tirah, wherein no invader had ever set foot.

"Will it take very long?" Thea asked in a voice that she believed to be casual and detached.

"That depends on a good many unaccountable factors. Probably a few months."

"And—will Vincent be in it all that time?"

"Very much so. If he comes out of it as well as he has come out of this curtain raiser, he won't do badly."

"I should think *not* indeed!" The fervour of her tone made Vincent gently press her fingers against his side. "And I think he ought to have a crumb of leave now, just to see me to Kohat."

"That little matter has already been settled." Desmond spoke lightly; but the human prick of jealousy was there. Her every word revealed how completely, in these few weeks, the needle of her nature had shifted from himself to the younger man: yea, though he had been father and brother and little less than deity to her all the years of her life. It was right and natural; and he thanked God it was Vincent

who had supplanted him; but it hurt none the less. Vincent and Eden, he explained, would be granted short leave to escort their wounded and their women-folk to Kohat, while one of Finlay's captains took temporary charge of Gulistan.

The arrangement received Thea's gracious sanction; and, the sun being gone, Desmond advocated a return to the fort, lest snipers had been left to pick off the unwary.

In the sitting-room of Eden's quarters they found him alone, pacing to and fro, with a tired, impatient look in his eyes.

"Still asleep is she?" Thea asked. It was obvious whose society he was impatient for.

"Yes. It's getting a bit late," he said, checking his walk and sitting on the edge of the table, where an empty glass stood among a litter of Home papers. "I hope she rouses up for dinner. There's that poor little beggar Phil squatting on the mat near her bed. Won't stir till she wakes; and he ought to be in bed himself. He's good with you. Perhaps you could get him away without a fuss? I'm such a clumsy brute. I'd be sure to disturb her."

"I'll manage him all right. And if we *should* happen to wake Phyllis, I don't believe you'd really be sorry!"

She patted his arm in speaking. They had become almost like brother and sister of late.

"Well, I've not seen her since tiffin, and there's been nothing to keep one going.—I've bedded down Finlay's chaps and the Gunners in the hornwork, sir," he explained to Desmond, as Thea went softly into Phyllis' room.

It was nearly dark; for the windows were small and high. Close to the bed Phil sat, still as a statue, hands clasped about his knees; and all the mother-love in Thea's heart went out to the little lonely figure waiting there in the dusk. With a swift, light step she ran to him, and crouching down took him in her arms.

"Flip, it's past bedtime. You *must* come now," she whispered: but he only shook his head.

"Not wifout Mummy. When *will* she wake up?"

"Look here, darling," Thea spoke low and imperatively. "Mummy mustn't wake up. She's dead-tired. If you make a fuss and disturb her, Daddy will be very angry. Come and undress yourself, like a big boy. Mummy will be so proud when I tell her in the morning."

She had him on his feet now. "Can't I give even a tiny kiss," he pleaded, "ever so carefully?"

Thea, loth to refuse him, glanced at the bed, where Phyllis lay with her face half hidden, exactly as she had left her hours ago; so sound asleep that she seemed scarcely to be breathing. *Was* she breathing? Had she fainted, perhaps—or——?

Instinctively Thea caught the boy close. "No, darling, better not," she said, hurrying him towards the room inhabited by Moti and Flop, talking all the while tenderly, incoherently, saying she knew not what. Anything to escape the awful fear that hovered on the dim edge of things, like a bird of prey, waiting to get its talons into her heart.

"There, my blessing," she had him safe in the 'Nursery' now. "Undress quick and be good to ayah."

He clung to her and kissed her. "Oh, I love you, I love you. *Do* stay with Flip!"

"Darling, I can't." It was all she could do to control her voice. "I'll try and come back afterwards. But there's dinner. If you love me, do what I tell you."

"I will, truly," he promised: and so she escaped.

Back in the half-dark room, she softly slid the bolt of the door behind her. Phil was not noted for obedience and she dared run no risk, in case——

That hovering fear was on her again now; fear such as the bullets in the hornwork had so strangely failed to produce. Her ears could catch no sound of breathing; yet, from sheer habit, she trod cautiously as she neared the bed. With a shaking hand she caressed the soft dark hair.

"Phyllis — angel Phyllis, speak to me," she entreated, her voice breaking into a sob. But there came no movement, no response from the silent presence that had been a storm-shaken woman so few hours ago; and the cheek she touched was cold as marble.

It was not fear now, but the bitter waters of anguish that welled up and flowed through all her being; while she stood with both hands pressed against her temples, feeling as if her brain would burst in the effort to realise, to understand.

It was useless. She could not believe that this was the end. There had been so many fainting fits—obstinate ones, too: and choking back her tears she fairly ran from the room.

Just beyond the threshold she paused, one hand on the door behind her, as though she would shield the husband even as she had shielded the son; not realising that she stood before three startled men, white as paper, her awful news in her eyes.

Before she could speak, Eden sprang to her, with a half-stifled cry, and caught her by the arms. "God! What is it? Let me go to her," he said hurriedly, his face grey, his lips shaking.

"I—I think—she's fainted——" Thea began. But he almost swept her aside; and the sharp sound of the closing door sent her headlong into Desmond's arms. In that first bewildering shock of grief, her lover was forgotten; her father was all.

Tenderly as any woman, Desmond gathered her on to his knee; and like a child she clung to him, shaken with sobs. Wisely he made no attempt to check that healing flow of tears. He merely tightened his hold, when the sobs shook her, and caressed her head with a slow, mechanical movement infinitely soothing.

Vincent, hovering near the table in a state of helpless misery, was divided between envy of Sir Theo's right and power so to soothe her and a quite inconsistent longing to escape from the unendurable sight of her grief. Scarcely less unendurable was the thought

of Eden, agonizing alone in the darkness behind that closed door.

Life, charged hourly with the threat of death, with wounds and flying bullets and the loss of two gallant sepoys, had, in these few crowded days, left an indelible impress on Vincent's mind and character. But this personal grief—that had shattered Eden in the hour of achievement, left Phil motherless and dissolved his radiant Thea into a Niobe—too pressingly invaded his heart. Tears ached in his throat. The need for escape grew imperative. It was his natural instinct to steer clear of disturbing emotions: and at a crisis, instinct will out. But, glancing towards Thea, he encountered her father's eyes; and the mute anguish in them banished all thought of his own very minor sensations. He knew something, by now, of this man's great capacity for affection; and Thea had said more than once that her father loved Phyllis like a sister. His face was drawn and set. He looked ill and utterly weary—as indeed he was; and he had spoken not a word since Thea flung herself into his arms.

Now the appeal of his eyes drew Vincent towards him; but when he tried to speak, no words would come; and instead, he passed a caressing hand over Thea's hair. Though dizzy and broken with grief, she felt instantly the difference of touch; and catching at his hand, she pressed it to her lips.

"O—oh," she moaned. "Here have I got you two darlings and he's got *no* one. And—he was wanting her so. And—there's Phil. I said I'd go to him."

She sat up now, her own sorrow checked at thought of those others who had lost everything; and at sight of her father's strange, set face, fear seized her and swift compunction.

"Beloved Dad!" She leaned her cheek to his. "I'm a selfish beast, making things worse for you. And you're ill again. I'm sure you are."

Desmond shook his head. "Don't worry. I'm all right," he said in a constrained voice.

"You're not all right. And oh, you *must* come down with us—now. Will you?"

"Yes. I think—I must."

Then, very gently, he put her away from him. The kitmutgar's introductory cough, outside, jerked them back into the relentless machinery of life that grinds on, though the heavens fall. Dinner was served; and that cough was Hasan Khan's considerate note of warning to the lovers, lest he embarrass them by entering unawares. Mercifully they had decided on a family dinner, and the bachelors were messing in the bungalow.

Desmond kissed his child and set her on her feet. "Go with Vincent, my darling," he said in a more natural voice. "I'll come later. I must see to the boy. Hope he's asleep. Anyway—to-morrow's time enough."

"Yes, yes." She clung to him a moment. "Father, I keep on wondering—where is she now? *Where* is she?"

Desmond sighed; then, taking her head between his hands, he looked steadily into her eyes. "Don't torment yourself that way, child, or you'll lose your balance altogether. She's a free spirit now; as much alive as you and I are. Nothing can shake my faith in that. More, we shall never know—till our own time comes. We can serve her still, through those she has left. You serve no one by—the other sort of thing. Remember that. Promise."

"Promise." A pause. "If—if you hadn't been here, I think—I'd have gone crazy."

He smiled and kissed her again. Tears welled over afresh; but she brushed them away and slipped a hand through Vincent's arm.

Desmond, left alone, sat down near the table, planted his elbows on it and grasped his head between his hands. It seemed seriously to need that form of compression. He was ill again, and he knew it. But there was no time to consider that; scarcely time to consider his own personal grief, that went deeper than

anyone but Honor would be likely to understand. The need of the moment was for rapid, practical thinking. The move from Fort Lockhart to Kohat must be as speedy as events would allow. Eden must have more than a few days leave. This thing would break him absolutely—for a time. Then—the campaign might just be his salvation. He himself must manage a brief spell at Kohat to "see things through," and generally make things move; for the transport congestion at Kushalghar was fast assuming nightmare proportions. He must also snatch a brief rest, if he were to start on this unique undertaking fit in body and mind. It would need a very thorough reconnaissance to-morrow to make sure that the coast was clear for his sorrowful cortége. Some sort of a coffin——

Thus mechanically his disciplined brain moved from point to point, holding grief at arm's-length; while one horrid thought kept hammering at the back of all. "It might have been Thea. It might have been Thea." That recalled Phil, and the cruel task ahead of trying to make him understand. To-night—well, he hoped the boy was asleep. And so he found him; tired out with the excitements of the day.

At the door of that other room he hesitated; then very softly lifted the latch. No response. The door was bolted from within. "Thea—of course," he said to himself, adding, as he returned to the sitting-room: "So like Honor. Wish to God she was out here now."

The heartache and sense of incompleteness, that were chronic during her absence, became suddenly overwhelming. Illumined by her, the darkest hour could not be altogether black: and in a crisis of this kind, both he and his impetuous little girl—unschooled in sorrow—had sore need of her sustaining presence, her serenity and poise. Meantime, he must do his poor masculine best. There was also Gwen—— That reminded him: Finlay must be told. At such a moment, there is no more hateful necessity. It is a turning of

the knife in the wound; not once only, but again and again.

He went to the writing-table, opened the blotter, and was confronted by Phyllis' handwriting—graceful, tender, and restrained like herself. No portrait could have called up a clearer vision of her; and it brought the first tears to his eyes. He shut the blotter sharply and thrust it into a drawer, lest Eden suffer the same shock later on.

In the drawer he found paper; and sitting down wrote with telegraphic brevity:—

"DEAR FINLAY,—We are in great grief here. We have lost Phyllis. While we believed her sleeping, she was gone. Could Gwen come down a little sooner than she intended, to mother three desolate children—one being mine?—Yours ever, THEO DESMOND."

That note addressed and despatched, he went to the door through which Eden had disappeared. This time it yielded. He carried a small hand-lamp, that made a feeble twilight in its own vicinity, and showed him Eden kneeling by the bed, his face hidden, one arm flung across his wife.

Treading softly, Desmond set down the lamp, well away from the bed. Eden did not stir; only his shoulders heaved in a shuddering sigh; and Desmond, coming nearer, laid his hand on one of them.

"Ted—my dear fellow," he said; and no one could express more in three words than Theo Desmond, when he had a mind.

His sole response was another shuddering sigh.

"I'll put something for you on the teapoy," he added, "later on—you must try to eat." A pause; then his fingers closed on Eden's shoulder. "I've been through it, man; or I'd not have ventured in here. I'll see to everything for you. And I'm coming to Kohat."

"Thank you, sir," Eden said huskily without moving; and Desmond attempted no futile word of comfort. For he had travelled that road.

Once again his hand pressed Eden's shoulder. Then he kissed the dear dark head on the pillow and went quietly out.

In the morning there was Phil to cope with; Phil, half frantic and quite unable to believe in the base desertion of himself by her who had never failed him in all the brief years of his life. His heartrending wail for "Mummy" brought Eden near madness, and strained to breaking-point Thea's hard-won self-control.

For this particular ordeal was mainly her affair, by the simple reason of her womanhood and the boy's devotion. Shaken and exhausted with sobbing, he clung to her convulsively and could not bear to let her out of his sight. Herself a spoiled child, none had ever made such severe demands upon her as this other spoilt child, left stranded in a world empty of mother-love: and Desmond noted, with a strange mingling of pride and pain, how fully Honor's share in her was revealed by her inexhaustible tenderness and patience towards this tragically unmothered child.

In this case, virtue had its reward. Her anguish of compassion for Phil dulled, superficially, the renewed sense of loss that morning brings to the bereaved. But the boy's clinging monopoly crippled her for practical purposes. Vincent did most of her packing, under direction; and she was surprised to find him so deft with his hands. Her indestructible joy in him lightened the gloom intermittently, like a sunbeam struggling through a fog. In the nursery, Moti did her fumbling best with the children's belongings; while Flop sat in a corner tearful and bewildered, but stolidly expectant of "Mummy's" return.

People came in during the morning—one or two: Finlay, with no trace of his sidelong smile; Jerry, a woe-begone ghost of himself. None stayed more than a few moments, except Vincent, the privileged, no longer uncomfortably aware of his own sensations. Eden, claimed by regimental business, moved and spoke slowly, uncertainly, like a man half stunned;

but the sight of his children was so evidently more than he could bear that, by Desmond's order, they were kept sedulously out of his way; no easy matter, in the case of Flop. Worse than all, some one must put together Phyllis' things—the little intimate things, sacred now, and so eloquent of her, that the simple matter of collecting and packing them was the greatest ordeal of the moment. That ordeal Desmond quietly took upon himself.

Eden could never have gone through with it. Thea had already enough on her young shoulders. But when she discovered his occupation, she achieved a temporary escape from Phil and found her father, by the dressing-table, looking down at a small object on the palm of his hand, his cheeks and lashes wet with tears. It was an antique pendant of aquamarines and pearls; his own gift to her on her twenty-first birthday and one of her dearest possessions. Only in Murree he had remarked upon her constancy in wearing it, and she had answered laughing, "I've a foolish fancy that it loves to be worn as much as I love to feel it hanging round my neck!" It was the remembrance of her 'foolish fancy' that unmanned him altogether: nor did he attempt to hide the fact from his child, who flung her arms about him and stroked his head, while he fastened the fine chain round her throat and slipped the pendant under her blouse.

"Eden will approve—when it's possible to talk of things," he said:—and went back to his packing.

Early in the afternoon, that sorrowful cortége set out from Fort Gulistan: Eden and Desmond leading; Phyllis following after, with a Union Jack for pall, four proud Sikhs for bearers, and a cavalry escort from Desmond's old regiment, headed by Paul. Thea had given up the ride—so keenly anticipated—to travel in a detested dandy with Phil; the service of all others for which Phyllis would have blessed her most. The boy, ill and spent with misery, lay sobbing in her arms, and Vincent rode beside her, till she beseeched him to go on ahead and ride with Paul.

"Somehow it seems to go through me twice as badly," she said, indicating Phil with a glance, "when I feel how it's hurting you too. Please go on. It will be a godsend to Paul and easier for me."

"True?"

"Utterly true." And, with his look of mute worship, he obeyed.

Behind them, Flop and Moti, Alton and his wounded, brought up the rear: and from high ground outside the fort a saddened group of officers stood watching them go. The cheers and good wishes, that should have graced the occasion, were hushed by that one silent presence in the midst of them—the woman who had died at her post as truly as any defender of them all.

A turn of the road, before they dipped from Saraghari to Fort Lockhart, gave Thea her last view of the 'real live fort' where she had spent the most wonderful weeks of her life. In early August, she had travelled this same road; an eager, high-hearted girl in search of adventure—and a lover. And there, isolated within those unpromising walls, she had scaled the heights and plumbed the depths of things, through intimate, personal contact with love and danger and death. And now she found herself with two motherless children on her hands. No wonder she dimly began to feel grown-up at last.

PHASE VI.

THE CRUCIBLE

CHAPTER I.

"Your love doth press
And reach in further than you know;
. . . And when you go,
There's loneliness in loneliness."
—ALICE MEYNELL.

"LOOK here, darling, when Aunt Thea reads, Flop and Vixen *must* keep quiet or run away to Moti. I can't mix up 'Water Babies' and a little yapping dog. Quite comfy, are you, Flip? Now—where did we stop?"

"Where they was all loving Mrs Didn't-be-done-by," Phil answered, nestling within her arm. "*I* like to call her Aunt Fea. It's much prettier and she's just the same."

Aunt Thea's eyes, that did not laugh so readily these days, brightened at that. The compliments of seven, however embarrassingly direct, have the merit of coming from the heart: and Thea—who had devoted three of the saddest weeks in her life to this particular boy—deserved no less at his hands. For answer, she kissed his head, opened the book and began to read.

The three were encamped in a sunny, secluded corner of Mrs Finlay's garden on a morning of early October, the most perfect month in the Plains of Northern India, where it is early autumn that brings the breath of resurrection and the promise of golden days. The relentless sun of September was tempered now by a light, keen wind that shepherded a flock of clouds across the blue, and flirted with stray tendrils

of Thea's hair. It was an ideal morning to welcome a lover, with whom she had parted on that day of blank desolation after the funeral; a day when all the light and colour seemed blotted out of life; when even the pang of his going seemed a drop in the ocean of her misery.

The three weeks between then and now (weeks darkened by Eden's tragedy and her father's sudden, brief collapse) had stolen the colour from her cheeks, and so dimmed her natural radiance that to Desmond she appeared like a lamp turned down. Perhaps the effect was increased by the black-and-white setting so uncongenial to one who loved colour extravagantly because it kept her soul alive. The white dress she wore to-day was sobered by a broad black sash, and black velvet at her throat. In the same fashion she had dressed Flop; while Phil wore a mourning band, in which already he began to take a melancholy pride. The incredible truth had penetrated slowly. For a while he had persisted in adding to his prayers a plea for his mother's return: till Thea could endure it no more. And the night of anguish that had followed was a thing she could not speak of even to her father or to Vincent himself.

Now, as she read on, soothing the boy into forgetfulness, her ears were strained to catch the sound of wheels. For St John had granted Vincent the special privilege of a flying visit before operations began in earnest; and by travelling at top-speed, he could just manage twenty-four hours under the same roof with her. To-morrow he must return to the Samana with Desmond and his Staff: and then——

It needed all her courage to confront the indefinite blank beyond. But she had learnt from her father the wisdom of living by inches: and the inch of life immediately ahead was bright enough to dispel all shadows for the time being.

Wheels at last! She broke off and sat upright: the veil of listlessness gone from her face.

"Go *on!*" commanded Phil, aggrieved at being

jerked out of his comfortable position against her shoulder.

"Not now. Here's Uncle Vincent," she said: and before he could remonstrate a low dog-cart bowled into view.

"Not Uncoo Vinx," he announced contentedly. "*Go* on."

This time she would fain have obeyed. For the dog-cart contained Mrs Williams and the Mungoose, just back from Murree; dutifully prompt in purveying congratulation and condolence: a rather awkward mixture. But Mrs Williams prided herself on her tact in 'these little matters.'

Thea, dismayed and angry at having been caught, was mentally locking all her most private doors against the inquisition in store. Phil she dismissed, in charge of Flop. "And don't come back *till* I call you," she added. For the boy could now bear no mention of his mother; and there was no knowing what might not bubble out of Mrs Williams on sympathy intent. She herself could only hope to ward off intolerable intimacies by summoning a touch of Lady Desmond's dignity to her aid. But the pathos of her changed aspect and her half-mourning went far to spoil the effect: and Mrs Williams, nervously descending from the cart, almost lost the second step in her anxiety to decide whether the peculiar circumstances did not call for a kiss.

Unfortunately she decided that they did; and before Thea realised her intent she had deposited a motherly dab on the girl's cheek.

"*Dear* Miss Desmond," she cooed apologetically, "such a *very* special occasion! And of course we hope you'll be happy. But just now—poor Mrs Eden! Going off like that. *Such* a shock! It quite upset me. As for you, my dear, you look a perfect wreck."

"Yes, *indeed* you do!" Lisa agreed so emphatically that Thea was wicked enough to suspect a grain of satisfaction underlying her sympathy.

"I'm afraid my looks are a fraud," she answered lightly, as she led them into the drawing-room with the Desmond lift of her head that exasperated a Mungoose already corroded with envy and uncharitableness. "I'm all right. It's Father who's been bad and—poor little Phil."

"Dear me, yes!" Mrs Williams was patting her cushion into position. "You *must* have had a time with him. Hopelessly spoilt. But then—the poor thing had her excuses. Her health—and that husband of hers——"

"Captain Eden has been splendid all through," Thea flamed out; aloofness dispelled by the call for championship.

"Yes, yes. *Most* amazing," Mrs Williams agreed with alacrity. "Very gratifying, of course. But it seems so sad—" she sighed as deeply as a severe compression would allow. "His poor dear wife—though I always *said* she'd work herself to death. And there are you stranded with those troublesome children when you ought to be free to enjoy your own good luck." Protest was so obviously futile that Thea attempted none; and the good lady added anxiously: "I suppose—Lady Desmond approves?"

"Naturally. Why not?"

"Oh, well—in these little matters," Mrs Williams floundered under the girl's direct gaze, "mothers often take different views from fathers——"

"Not in our family!" Thea interposed with a wicked twinkle. "She's on her way out, thank goodness. My brother's better."

"Ah! I'm glad of that. Your *position*, you know—and Captain Eden's children——"

"Is it scandalous?" Thea asked in her most innocent voice: but Mrs Williams waved aside the frivolous question.

"You're too young, my dear," she said, "to understand how quickly a girl's name gets bandied about in India. Up at Murree, for instance—well, your news took the whole station by surprise——"

"I suppose that's what you *intended*," the Mungoose struck in, having bided her time. "You were very clever the way you put us all *off the scent*, including poor Mr Howard—Captain Howard, I should say. When you rushed off to the Samana, naturally we all thought you'd gone after *him*, not after Mr Leigh——"

"I didn't go after any one," Thea retorted; but two bright spots in her cheeks told the Mungoose she had drawn blood.

Suddenly those bright spots deepened; for now there were unmistakable sounds of arrival; and before Lisa could deliver a second thrust, the kit-mutgar announced, "Leigh Sahib."

Mrs Williams beamed archly on the blushing girl. "Well anyway, now, here's someone come *after* you! Why didn't you tell us? And how long can he stay?"

"He's going back to-morrow," Thea answered, in a desperate hope that even Mrs Williams might understand.

But although Vincent's entrance forced her to rise, the obtuse, kindly soul continued to hover on the hearth-rug purring congratulations and inquiries, while her step-daughter looked daggers at her unconscious back.

For Lisa had seen the light in Vincent's eyes when they rested on Thea's face; and in that moment she had her reward for a score of petty sins against them both. She had worked up just enough of real feeling for Vincent to make the sight of these two together a very bitter business. But the stream of Mrs Williams' good nature still flowed on over the rocky ground of Vincent's monosyllables, till it occurred to her dimly that she might be *de trop;* whereupon she announced the fact with her usual engaging frankness.

"Now I'm *sure* you're cursing me and dying to get rid of me!" she said, petrifying Vincent by a motherly pat on his arm: and as no one contradicted her, she drifted, still purring, towards the verandah door, shep-

herded by Vincent, who, for the life of him, could not look her daughter in the eyes.

Thea remained on the hearth-rug, hands pressed against her temples, vexed with herself for feeling so shaken that when Vincent reappeared she greeted him with a rather uncertain smile.

"My blessed one!" was all he said. But his arms were round her, and he lost no time in kissing away her tears. Then: "Curse those women," he added, with very human emphasis.

"Oh, I don't know. Poor dears! I'm sure they haven't a glimmering notion of what real happiness—*this* sort of happiness—means. But thank Heaven, they're gone. Let's forget them. Sit!" She indicated an arm-chair of generous proportions.

"Room for us both, I think," he said; and drew her down with him into its padded depths.

She let out a sigh of content. "Here we stay, utterly uninterrupted, till tiffin-time! Think of it!"

So far, it had been a case of snatching at their new-found joy. Now they had leisure—eight or nine infinite hours—to drink deep of it; and they found it very good. But Thea's large-eyed pallor caught at Vincent's heart. "I'm afraid it's been a black time for her, this three weeks," he said; and she nestled closer.

"What matter—now? But it was pitch-black—sometimes, with my poor Flip, and the blessed Dad quite ill, and Captain Eden—oh, we'd *never* have believed, a year ago, it could break him up like this. Sometimes I feel half afraid again—about the whisky."

Vincent looked grave. "I've noticed, since he got back. Poor fellow! I don't wonder. But I think the campaign'll start soon enough to save him. It can't be long now before we're at it again in earnest."

She shivered.

"How d'you feel about it yourself, darling—after Gulistan? Keen? Or dreading it, just a wee bit, in your heart?"

"Just a wee bit," he confessed honestly. "For very mixed reasons. But I'm keen about the new country, the adventure of the thing. And it links us all up—a few weeks of it—more than a year in cantonments. It's a fine, manly sort of business. But I'm afraid I still shirk facing Afridis in the open."

"You did, though—that day."

He bit his lip at the remembrance. "I as nearly as anything—didn't! Thea, it was a hideous sensation. Hope I never go through it again. I'm not a *pukka* soldier yet, for all the polite things they've said about Gulistan. And it's this campaign that must make me one—if I'm to marry you."

"If?" she rebuked him softly.

"Well, it's a soldier you're after, isn't it, beloved?"

"It's *you* I'm after, as the Mungoose had the impertinence to hint just now. But there is a soldier hidden in you somewhere, Vinx. And I can't help wanting him to command the situation. You know, I'm made that way."

"Very well. He shall: or—I resign."

His voice had its new steadfastness. But at the last words she laid her fingers on his mouth. "That sort of thing's not permitted—even in fun." Then in her sudden, impulsive fashion she clung to him and kissed him. "I'm not such an easy person to get rid of, Mr Vincent Leigh! Besides, I know it's all coming right. I've got a big faith in you, now, that I honestly—didn't have before. Those two months in the far hills seem to have lighted a new lamp inside you."

Vincent smiled "It wasn't only the hills. It was Sir Thakur Das, and the sheer breathing space of solitude. I think—for some natures, it's quite as real a need as air and food."

"Will I sometimes have to let you go off, then, all by your lone, to breathe and feed?"

"Would you?"

"I would." One finger-tip was caressing the hair at his temple; a trick he had noticed in tender moods with her father. "You know, darling, you've hardly

told me anything about that time, except in your wonderful letter that saved my life! And dearly I'd love to hear more: if you feel you can tell?"

He did 'feel,' and he proceeded to tell a good deal more than he had ever believed would go into words.

And behold, far too soon, it was tiffin-time, and they were caught unawares by Desmond, with Phil—who had 'faithfully waited hours and hours'—clinging to his hand. Desmond, fresh from the battle of the bullocks and *bhusa*[1] bags, waxed eloquent over transport delays, that irked none more than himself, and had elicited a certain amount of criticism from those who had least knowledge of the huge task in hand.

"All very well," said he, "for intelligent gentlemen in newspaper offices and clubs to belabour me with platitudes. I'd like to give some of 'em a free invite to spend a week at Kushalghar! Ten trains a day from Pindi vomiting their contents on to that one congested platform and siding; and the whole line, for a quarter of a mile, in one huge breastwork of *bhusa* bags! We've a quarter of a lakh of pack animals to organise and feed, to say nothing of the troops. Quite a side issue! And now there's this fresh bother of the tribesmen in our own regiments. A good many are deserting—naturally enough. How about your fellows, Vincent?"

"On the whole they're splendid. But five of my Pathans disappeared last week. One was Thea's friend Fuzl Ali Khan——"

"The wretch! After all I did for him!" Thea broke in. "But I wouldn't mind betting those Shaitan brothers were at the bottom of it."

"Very perspicacious of you, as you'll see, if you let me finish my story! It seems he got wind of their being in the neighbourhood, and the temptation was too much for him. But he had the decency to leave his rifle behind, which Afzul took for a token that he had gone upon his own business. And, sure

[1] Chopped straw.

enough, just before I left, back he came, in high feather, with a blood-stained rag round his arm and three more corpses to his credit! Queer folk aren't they? But this affair must put some of them in a very awkward position. Can anything be done about it, sir?"

"Well, Government has decided to issue a very sound order announcing that we'll respect the property of all loyal Afridis and excuse them from service in the campaign. That's to say, any Afridis in the regiments on this border can be transferred for service elsewhere."

"That seems fair enough. But I fancy most of my fellows will hang on. I don't quite see old Afzul leaving his beloved *Pultan* just when the curtain's going to ring up."

Desmond smiled. The change in Vincent pleased him fully as much as it pleased his daughter. "Well, he and St John can settle it up between 'em. And if he chooses to go bail for the others—Ah, Gwen!" Mrs Finlay entered as he spoke. "Come and save us from undiluted shop. We've tumbled into it headlong. And I'm dying for tiffin."

Gwen Finlay saved them from more than shop. She saved Thea from the clutches of Phil, leaving the lovers free to divide their afternoon between Finlay's big chair and a ride along their favourite Hangu road, through a changed Kohat—streaked and dotted with camps, lively with bugle calls, and restless with the sluggish stream of camels and mules and creaking bullock-carts, that flowed across the desert from Kushalghar to Hangu, and on to Shinwari, the advanced base of operations: a matter of some seventy-eight miles.

Every open green in and around Kohat bore its crop of strange new fruitage: hospitals, field-parks, or transport lines. Every day tonga-loads of officers clattered into a station already overflowing with them. Regiment after regiment arrived and passed on to swell the main column at Shinwari. Only hospitals

and parks and commissariat go-downs stood fast, like evergreens in a forest of deciduous trees.

"Isn't it amazing and fascinating?" Thea remarked as they rode past a camp of Imperial Service Troops sent up by Kaparthala and Jhind. "It all looks such an aimless jumble; yet there's order and purpose behind even the strayest atom of a camp-follower."

"Like life," Vincent remarked, watching a group of jovial Highlanders, very evidently pleased with themselves and their surroundings.

"Yes, like life; you dear, wise Vinx." Her eyes dwelt upon him tenderly. In his business-like khaki trappings he looked very much a soldier—and something more; like her own admired father. "It hardly seems the same place, does it? or we the same people as this time last year, when you were strolling down to tea in the dear blue bungalow to call on a very new Thea, playing the fiddle and the fool with two mad babies. And—and now—" her voice broke, "sometimes the look in my poor Phil's eyes is more than I can stand. And other times I sort of hate myself for being so blessedly happy underneath, in spite of all. If only to-morrow——"

"Thea, remember!" Vincent put in quietly. "For the moment there's no to-morrow. This afternoon is 'a garden enclosed,' a perfect memory to uphold us through the two or three months ahead."

She sighed. "Two or three eternities! But I promised. And I'll behave."

So they banished to-morrow and drank deep of their present cup of happiness. And in the evening there was music to crown their perfect memory; 'Rosamunde' and Vincent's favourite ballads. And then—in spite of everything, to-morrow found them out——

CHAPTER II.

"The patience of the British is as long as a summer day; but the arm of the British is as long as a winter's night.—*Pathan Saying.*

ORDERS for the first move forward were out at last: but the Sikhs, still guarding the Samana forts, were not yet included in the active programme. The scattered regiment was concentrated in those forts; and there were other troops also, with Desmond and his staff, installed at Fort Lockhart: and no lack of water for all. The month of waiting had not been wasted on the ridge. Large, new reservoir tanks and the repairing of all defences made it possible to hold the position in strength, till the main column had forced the natural gateway into the Kankhi valley.

By now it was clear that they would encounter a more or less organised resistance, in spite of Desmond's straightforward proclamation announcing a mere military march through Tirah, that the British Government might dictate fresh terms to the tribes from Afridi headquarters, the valley of Maidan. Those who desired peace and fair terms, he told them, had the matter in their own hands. Those who preferred war must accept the consequences. But though many desired peace, the Mullahs did not; and the Mullahs carried the day.

Desmond's sappers, repairing the roads, had been persistently attacked. The great bluff of Dargai—visible from the Samana—bristled with sangars. These things spelt war; and the British force had no

quarrel with that decision. All they asked was leave to begin. And on October 17th it came.

The gateway ahead of them was a saddle-back pass, formed by a cleft in the Samana range and flanked by dominating heights; on the east, the sheer cliffs of the Samana Suk; on the west, Dargai—fifteen hundred feet of rock and stone—a very Gibraltar for strength. From their ridge, the Sikhs had a fine view of the first successful clearing of those heights by a simultaneous attack in front and flank: an attack planned to relieve the sappers from 'sniping' and to examine a reported route farther west. Finlay—now promoted to a brigade—had commanded that brilliant prelude to greater things. By sheer climbing power, Borderer and Gurkhas had scaled the stubborn heights; and the tribes, taken unawares, had not stayed to face their dashing charge.

Desmond had followed every move, through his field-glasses, with profound approval; and, when all was done, he turned to St John, who stood at his elbow. "Damned good bit of work that. Wish I could let 'em hang on to the position, after taking it in such style. But, as things stand, I'm afraid it's out of the question."

There were others present who thought differently; but Desmond and St John knew the lie of the land as those others did not. They knew that the great bluff could not be held as a mere advanced post; that its impregnable aspect on one side was belied by fatally easy slopes on the other. They knew, also, that the nearest water lay three miles off, along a track commanded by enemy heights: and, even while Desmond was discussing the matter with his Chief of Staff, helio flashes reported a *lashkar*, many thousands strong, rapidly approaching from the valley. That settled matters. The risk of being cut off eclipsed all else: and the order flashed back to leave the ridge.

"The men 'll curse me in their hearts: and I don't blame them," Desmond said afterwards to St John,

who had staunchly upheld his decision. "And the newspaper chaps will curse me with their pens. Every one knows better, on these occasions, than the man in command. Of course it may mean a stiff job when the real advance comes; but our fellows can be trusted to pull it through."

He was right. Seldom, if ever—in the days before all values were altered—had British troops been called upon to face a stiffer 'job' than the second storming of Dargai: the Balaclava of British India.

The suggestion of making the real advance by another route had been scouted by Desmond, lest it seem a confession of timidity: and he, personally, saw no reason for reoccupying Dargai. In his opinion, a couple of regiments and batteries could be so disposed as to discourage snipers and protect the left flank of the advancing force; and his orders to Shinwari had implied as much. But in all matters of detail he wisely gave discretionary powers to the General commanding the Division—his old friend Geoff Olliver, from Peshawur. Olliver, it seemed, had different ideas on the subject: hence the gallant and terrible engagement, which only at the eleventh hour was converted from disaster into the one outstanding victory of the whole campaign.

And so it came about that Vincent—by way of initiation into the 'real thing'—was privileged to witness, from the Samana Suk, as fine an exhibition of pertinacity and courage, against fearful odds, as General could demand or flesh or blood achieve. For on the headland opposite Dargai, the Sikhs were posted to protect the right flank of the 3rd Brigade; and across the two-mile gap, from ridge to ridge, all could be clearly seen: the endless line of khaki figures, horses and guns crawling over the Chagru Kotal, fifteen hundred feet below; the sudden check; the sangars opposite, haloed with puffs of smoke, soft and harmless-looking, beautiful against the blue: the order to halt and storm that impregnable position, now evidently occupied in force.

What force? That was the question of questions. Desmond, scouring the heights through his binoculars, swore under his breath. His orders to Olliver had included certain dispositions designed to clear the sangars without a costly frontal attack. Those orders had obviously been disregarded; nor was there any sign of the flanking movement on which he had laid special stress, should an assault prove unavoidable. Olliver, a bold and stubborn soldier, had not scrupled to make full use of his discretionary powers. He had twenty miles of transport to protect, and he meant to make 'a clean job' of Dargai before he allowed his column to proceed. Desmond himself would have kept the column slowly moving forward; by which means the lie of the land would soon enable it to threaten the enemy's communications. But this was Olliver's affair; though, if disaster came of it, the responsibility would be his. The crown of generalship has its thorns: and for the next few hours Desmond was on thorns as sharp as he had ever endured.

The 9th Sikhs—burning to avenge the massacre of Saraghar—watched, with scarcely less concern, those desperate doings that, once undertaken, must be carried through at any cost.

Up three nullahs, that converged upon a deadly open stretch of hillside, the Gurkhas could be seen crawling like ants, with Dorsets and Devons for support; while three batteries and a Maxim peppered the ridge. Beyond that unsheltered space, the bluff rose sheer, defying shell and shrapnel by its natural formation and its crown of sangars. The battery on the Suk had its appointed part in the scheme, but the Sikh officers, condemned to idleness, stood about in groups: Howard restless and impatient, Eden gloomily cursing his luck. From his heart he envied the men who would soon be called upon to cross that open space under a withering fire from above. Dearly though he had loved Phyllis, through good moods and bad, he would not have believed that life, lacking her presence, could become the meaningless blank in

which he had automatically lived and moved for the past few weeks. Nothing, it seemed, had power to stir him any more. For the moment, even the zest of soldiering was gone. He saw the campaign ahead mainly as a means to one end—oblivion.

Vincent—always honest with himself—made no pretence of envying the men who climbed steadily nearer to that rocky slope. Its very emptiness fascinated him, suggesting to his troublesome, poetic imagination the altar-stone awaiting the oblation of sacrifice. Yet, among those who were mounting the altar stairs, not one had any thought of sacrifice or of heroism. For them it was simply 'a stiff job,' as Sir Theo had said: and the will of every unit among them was set to carry it through. There is a power in such concerted resolve to lift men above themselves, as hundreds of quite ordinary men were lifted that day.

The Gurkhas, backed by the Dorsets, were in position now, crowded close under the last morsel of cover; before them eighty yards of open space; above them tier on tier of sangars, awaiting the given moment.

Then began that series of gallant rushes that were at once the glory and the tragedy of Dargai. Then, all along the ridge, rose a feathery fringe of smoke; a thousand rifles crackled defiance, and answering clouds of dust rose up from the fire-swept zone below. In the midst of it were the Gurkhas, dashing up the slope toward some sheltering rocks at the cliff's base; and, when it cleared, the way they went was strewn with dying and dead.

Another rush, and yet another: almost as terrible, thought Vincent, to watch as to endure. And, every time, the sangars spoke in concert, with unerring effect. The head of each rush literally crumbled away the moment it reached the open. Men could be seen falling, struggling up, only to be riddled with bullets and fall again; till they learnt the awful lesson that, once hit, they must lie there among the bullets, still as the dead. To move a limb was instantly to be stilled by compulsion.

Vincent, standing near Howard, heard him swear as he saw, through his glasses, an officer and a score of men melt into a writhing heap under the pitilessly accurate onslaught from the crest.

Then he turned to Vincent, his eyes ablaze. "What the devil are the C.O.'s up to? If ever there was a case for massed tactics—! The men are magnificent. But it's sheer murder! There's young Bird facing the music a second time. By God, he'll manage it. No—he's down. A V.C., and no mistake. Hope he lives to get it."

But he did not: and Vincent, as he watched, felt nearer tears than curses. It would take him long, he felt, before he could look upon such sights with a soldier's eye; longer still before he could become as they. He could scarcely bear to go on looking; yet neither could he bear to turn away: and throughout that critical October morning he was more keenly alive to the pathetic futility than to the glory of it all.

"Great Scot! Are they going to throw up the sponge? Impossible! What the devil—!" Howard dropped his binoculars with a groan. "The guns haven't half played up yet. Wish to God they had Sir Theo over there."

What Sir Theo himself was feeling, in that awful hour of uncertainty, those who knew him best might surmise. His face told them little and his tongue less. Like Howard, he regarded retreat as impossible; yet the taking of Dargai began to seem scarcely less so. For four hours artillery and infantry had spent themselves—apparently without the smallest result. A Colonel on the spot helioed, "Useless waste of life. The position impregnable!" And that message, flashed on to General Olliver, elicited an immediate order that the position be taken at all costs: three minutes of concentrated artillery fire to precede the assault.

Then it was Gordons to the front; and the kilted men could be seen streaming up the watercourse from the knoll where they had covered the Gurkhas' ad-

vance. It was a stiff half-hour's climb to the cup-shaped hollow where cover ended, and the fatal slope began. Then the helio flashed again; and twenty-four guns gave answer with a vigour, volume, and accuracy very heartening to the five battalions that thronged the hollow, where Highland kilts made a brilliant patch of colour and bayonets glinted in the sun.

It was to be mass tactics this time. And when the guns had ceased speaking, came the skirl of the slogan, the wild cheer of the Gordons in response to their Colonel's "Are you ready? Come on!" And they came on, in one swift, resistless rush, while the cliff, from end to end, belched smoke and flame and lead.

As usual, the leading company crumbled into nothing; but there were scores behind to fill the gaps. Louder and more tumultuous grew the music of the pipes: The "Cock of the North" and the "Haughs o' Cromdale," the charging tune of the Gordons. Though the pipers fell, the pipes skirled on, triumphing even over the tumult of battle.

After the Gordons came the rest, who had borne the burden of the day—Sikhs, Derbys, Dorsets, and more Gurkhas: wave on wave of resolute, struggling men, half hidden by the dust of a thousand bullets. Midway, a semblance of cover gave them pause for breath: then one final spurt, under slackening fire, to the cliff's base, where three companies of Gurkhas had been lying for hours awaiting help to carry the crest.

And there was no need of an assault after all.

By that one magnificent act of collective courage the day was won. The Pathans had no wish for personal encounter with men whose persistence, in the face of a withering fire, could so snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Up the narrow zigzag path they clambered unopposed, only to find the sangars deserted and the Orakzais hurrying down the gentle gradients into the valley. Then the hills rang with cheer on cheer, from the crest first and also from the Kotal; from tired troops and transports and, not least, from the Samana Suk.

Vincent, listening to the shouts and the talk around him, felt an increasing sense of pride in his own link with those who could so dare and so achieve: and the haunting sense of pathos was swallowed up in grandeur, even as Death had been swallowed up in victory.

There could be no question of pushing on to Camp Karappa that night. Though it was but seven miles off, the road was of the roughest, and that hampering tail of transport animals would inevitably be raided after dark by the men who could not be induced to face open fight. There was nothing for it but a night in the open, with all the baggage parked where it stood. Dorsets and Gurkhas crowned a fine day's work by a bitter bivouac on the summit of Dargai; and the Highlanders added to their laurels by carrying down from that fatal slope some sixty-seven dead and wounded Gurkhas; an act of simple brotherly-kindness that made a lasting impress on every Indian regiment present that day.

The reckoning up of casualties was a sorrowful business. But when all was said, the price paid had been none too heavy for the storming of a position deemed impregnable: and the moral effect of such a victory, so won, still remained to be revealed.

There was joy in the Sikh camp that night for other reasons than the capture of Dargai. The troops at Fort Lockhart, with Sir Theo and his staff, were to march at dawn and join the main column in the Khanki valley, where the two Divisions must concentrate before crossing the Sampagha Pass into the Orakzai Tirah.

That march was Vincent's first taste of rearguard duty, of which he was to have a surfeit before he was many months older. It was also a revelation of the 'best way not to get there,' as Jerry philosophically remarked, while the two sat smoking on a boulder pending the readjustment of half a dozen loads that had slipped off at an awkward corner. As the delinquents could not leave the track without committing suicide, the check had wrought confusion among

thousands of animals, who, all day long, had been slipping and stumbling down from the ridge. Every half hour or so this sort of thing had repeated itself with wearisome regularity; and by two of the morning they had struggled six miles to Talai. There they rested till dawn; and not until sunset next evening did they trail into Karappa Camp; having been thirty hours on the road.

"Nearly three hours to the mile. I call it a record!" Jerry insisted stoutly, when Blake—who ran up against him in camp—presumed to treat the matter as a joke. "Wish *you* could have a taste of rearguard duty with a mixed pack, including donkeys. 'Bet you'd give yourself airs!"

It could not be called an exhilarating start; but they were linked up at last with Sir Theo's little army; and high above their camp towered the Sampagha Pass, its natural conformation almost a repetition of Dargai.

On every height, standards and restless figures betokened determined resistance; and the troops in camp were all impatience to begin. The Khanki valley in October, bitter cold at night, hot as an oven at noon, was no inviting spot to tarry in: yet here Desmond and his force were doomed to a prolonged halt, enlivened by sniping and occasional attempts to rush the camp. The delay was distracting, for every reason: but Hercules' self could not hustle the pack animal of the East or his driver. And day by day an unending stream of transport added fresh numbers to the largest encampment that dreary spot had ever held.

At last there dawned a morning, drizzling and bitter cold, when the Sikhs were ranged, with other regiments of Finlay's brigade, on a ridge well above the hated valley, with the long brown spurs of the pass right before them. Above, the hills scowled black and dismal in the half light; through the nullah below, ghostly shadows of other troops were moving

into position; and as the sky cleared, masses of the enemy, dimly seen, gave promise of stern fighting ahead.

The pass presented three successive positions, well supplied with natural cover and sangars. From rocky heights and ridges a galling fire could be poured upon the troops; and there was no possibility of a flanking movement as at Dargai. The pass must be carried by assault: but Desmond, very much alive to earlier mistakes, had laid his plans accordingly. A demonstration on his left was to draw off the enemy in that direction; six batteries, massed under Lenox's old friend, Colonel Max Richardson, were to play upon the sangars for all they were worth, while Desmond thrust his infantry battalions, like a wedge, right into the centre of the enemy's position.

Resistance or no, there was stiff climbing in store for them. Vincent had enjoyed a taste of it the day before; up hill and down, from dawn to dusk, on a slab of chocolate and a few biscuits. Now, in the chill twilight of morning, he tramped beside his men to the foot of the pass; then up, eternally up, listening, with a thrill of dread, for the opening chorus of the guns.

Soon after seven it came, from the batteries of the 1st Division. And so ideally were these placed for dropping shells behind the sangars, that very soon scores of tribesmen could be seen streaming out of their first position on to higher ground. Then it was long-range volleys; fix bayonets; and charge; while one Mountain Battery pushed on up the pass—as only a Mountain Battery can—and made things exceedingly unpleasant for the bold spirits who clung to the higher ridge. On and up pressed the infantry battalions, covered by splendid practice from the guns; and the moment they extended their front, the enemy—remembering Dargai—decided to stay no longer question.

Over the hills to the right swarmed the Queen's and Gurkhas. But there remained, on the left, one

commanding crest still occupied by sharpshooters, who dominated the path below; and Finlay, calling up St John, bade him 'clear the course' with his Sikhs under a covering fire from the Borderers and the guns.

St John glanced once up that wall of rock. It was a stiff climb for a man of seven-and-forty. Then: "Howard! Eden!" he shouted, picking out his companies. "Come on! We'll give them a lead."

And, all in a moment, Vincent found himself standing just as he had watched those others stand, tense and alert, at the head of his men, unmistakable fear in his heart; yet not a glimmer of hesitation about going forward when the signal came. In that moment, which seemed an eternity, he knew what the collective spirit of discipline and duty can do for a man in those very crises where the individual will might fail and the individual heart shrink.

He heard the Colonel's word of command, and caught a glimpse of Eden's face, alight as it had not been since Gulistan days. Then they were all out in the open, scrambling pell-mell towards cliffs that rained bullets; the roar and rattle of their own covering fire cheering them on.

Two of Vincent's men, abreast of him, staggered and fell. Afzul Khan and a Jemadar picked up one between them. The other rolled down and down; and as Vincent, with a shudder, looked after him, a bullet whizzed through his left sleeve, just grazing the arm. Startled and half unnerved, he dashed on and gained the blessed shelter of some rocks on the very heels of the Colonel, who turned and smiled on him, a gleam of understanding in his eyes.

"Rather unpleasant business," he remarked, as the rest came pouring in: and then—it was all to do over again. Another deadly fifty yards, and another breathing space right under the lee of the cliff.

The Pathans were holding up their fire for the next rush, exactly as he had seen them do at Dargai: and this time, Vincent felt desperately like flinching at the

critical moment. But as the word of command rang out, he caught Howard scanning his face. Howard, of all people, must not be allowed to suspect. Bullets were preferable: any number of them; for there are greater things in life than mere living.

Once again he was in the open, dashing headlong over the rough ground, doing his level best to keep cool and hold thought in leash. Again he saw one of his men pitch forward, shot through the head. But thanks to the covering fire, bullets were fewer now: and they reached the cliffs with but three men wounded and one killed. The climb that followed eclipsed all that had gone before; but the sangars above were silent; and Vincent, relieved beyond measure, put all his heart into the more congenial task. His two months of tramping stood him in such good stead that he and the Colonel were the only officers left with the leading companies when at last the crest was gained.

Dead weary, but triumphant, they sank gratefully on to the lower end of a sangar and looked down into the high, beautiful valley of Mastura—a very paradise of peace; its fruit-trees splashed with the last blaze of autumn; its hamlets nestling under grey cliffs, its watch-towers, with their overhanging eaves, adding a certain rugged grace to the picture: and, away across the wide valley, uprose the Arhanga Pass, their final obstacle, gateway into the Afridi Tirah.

St John glanced at his watch. "Not half-past ten. Only five hours since we fell in; and I verily believe you and I are the first two white men to set eyes on the Promised Land. Sir Theo must be well pleased with to-day's business: a clean, straight job, thanks to the good use he made of the guns. All the honours of the day rest with them: and I wouldn't mind prophesying that the Arhanga Pass will be a walk over—after this and Dargai."

CHAPTER III.

"Life is no life to him that dares not die,
And death no death for him that dares to live."
—NEWBOLT.

ST JOHN'S prophecy came true. The Afridis made small attempt to hold their main gateway against the men who had stormed Dargai and shelled the sangars of Sampagha. Desmond's little army, pushing on over the Arhanga Pass, found Maidan deserted, but not devastated: an important advantage for all concerned.

The valley itself was a disappointment to those who had looked for a second Gulmerg. Here were neither natural glades nor forests of deodar; but a long dust-coloured plain at the foot of dust-coloured hills. In early November, its cornfields were barren, its orchards leafless. Wild olives and blue pines, on the higher slopes, added little colour to a region that had already settled down to its winter sleep; and bitter blasts from the Safed Koh warned the intruders that they had best achieve their business quickly and be gone.

Meantime, an outcrop of tents, lines of horses, and all the stir of a military camp, effectually waked the dead valley to life. The empty homesteads — mere isolated block-houses, each with its guardian watch-tower—yielded welcome supplies of grain and walnuts, potatoes and honey; and here, in this stronghold of blood-feuds and freebooters, an alien army proceeded

to strike root. Here Sir Theo Desmond would duly announce, to jirgahs of both tribes, the final terms of the British Government. But those jirgahs had yet to show signs of submission; and while they considered the matter, there were tributary valleys to be reasoned with, explored, and surveyed. In spite of appearances, those who best knew the Afridi were slow to believe that he had tamely given up the game. Nor was it long before he showed his hand. Dargai and the Sampagha had very evidently cured him of his doubtful taste for general action; and every day brought fresh proof that guerilla tactics and loot were henceforth to be the order of the campaign. For a time the monotony of life under canvas was broken only by foraging excursions, expeditions, and vigorous sniping after dark, a form of warfare that even the keenest soldier cannot pretend to enjoy. Howard and Eden wondered, with aggrieved iteration, what the deuce Sir Theo could be up to; and the latter again showed signs of falling back on his old consolation. As for Vincent, he found it no hardship whatever to possess in patience his eternally interested soul.

On an afternoon towards the middle of the month, he sat at tea with Paul and Desmond, under the awning of Desmond's tent, describing a recent tramp, with Afzul Khan and a party of his Pathans, to the sacred grove at Bagh, where he had seen for himself the shrine supplied by the involuntary martyr whom Allah had delivered to the Afridis for the good of their souls.

"Judging from their recent behaviour," remarked Desmond, sipping his tea out of an enamelled iron cup, "I'm afraid that saintly gentleman's blood was spilt in vain. The Orakzais who came in the other day meant business, and will probably accept our terms. But the so-called Afridi jirgah was all eye-wash. A picked assortment of Methuselahs! Every old pensioner the scoundrels could lay hands on. Not a man of the Aka Khels or the Zakkas among the lot. I've been too lenient with their property,

confound them! Mere destruction's a horrid business. But it's the only way with folk who refuse to fight. They need touching up sharply; and that's the main object of to-morrow's expedition. I'm glad you're fit enough to go, Vincent. No objections?"

"None at all, sir!" Vincent answered, smiling at the frank question. He had been prevented by a severe chill and fever from accompanying an earlier excursion of Finlay's brigade. But to-morrow's affair would be a matter of four days' absence: General Mullen's brigade, with St John's Sikhs lent in addition—a valuable addition, as events proved.

"Phit-phit!" the crack of a Lee-Metford, twice in quick succession, made them all start and tilt their chairs.

One bullet snapped the leg of the camp table and sent the tea-things clattering to the ground. The second passed clean through Desmond's helmet, skimming his hair. But it was the two boys who changed colour. The older man merely set his lips. It was not his first escape of the kind. Here, and in the Khanki valley, he had had half a dozen at least.

"God is merciful!" he said gravely. Then—as an orderly hurried forward to collect the scattered meal—he added: "Their evening salaam to the General Sahib! Bold devils, starting before dark."

"Come along in, Father." Paul rose briskly and slipped a hand through Desmond's arm.

"All right, old boy. In or out, the chances are even. But this is warmer any way." They stood together spreading their hands over the charcoal brazier, for directly the sun vanished they were in the grip of frost. "Markham had a narrow shave yesterday. They've got the range of headquarters to a T."

"Then let's shift headquarters," Paul remarked with emphasis.

"Quite useless, old boy; and bad policy. After all, it's natural. I'm the sinner-in-chief. And I'm as well sangared and sand-bagged as even Mother could

wish!" He turned to Vincent. "Don't let on to Thea. We have to put up with these things. No reason why they should."

"No, sir." Vincent spoke rather absently. He was just realising that, till now, he had not known how much he loved this man.

"Our next letters ought to be from Peshawur," Desmond went on. "I told Honor better take the child straight there, as I'm shifting our base from Kohat. They'll be all right with Mrs Olliver till we can join 'em again."

He sighed. It was nine months since he had seen Honor; and the look in Paul's eyes, a moment ago, had recalled her too vividly for comfort. The talk reverted to shop, and very soon Vincent took his leave. The hour before mess was always, if possible, devoted to Thea.

"See you again later," Desmond said at parting; for the 51st, who messed the Sikhs, had arranged a guest night on the eve of the expedition, and Desmond and his son were dining.

In his diminutive tent, by the light of a collapsible lantern, Vincent sat down to complete the diary-letter, written up every day, to her whom he had parted with a month ago. The events crowded into those few weeks, the new country, the new experiences, the toughening of his fibre, and the increasing sense of comradeship with his kind — one of war's greater compensations—made the space between then and now seem ages long. Only her happily spontaneous letters, that brought him the very sound of her voice, seemed able to annihilate distance and time. He was absorbed in his third reading of the last one, when a sputtering, crashing volley of bullets made him start and change colour. The sound was a deal too close for his taste; and the scream of a wounded mule suggested their own transport lines.

Later, on his way to Mess, stray shots rang out again, here and there, with intent to catch British

officers wandering through the camp in search of dinner. Evidently 'flea-bites' were to be the order of the evening; and the so-called Kohat Camp seemed to be favoured with special attention. To the Sikhs and the 51st, from Kohat, was added one cavalry squadron, under Blake, who—in Howard's inelegant slang—was 'full of beans' at not being left out of 'the show.' He and his subaltern messed with the Kohatis. But his relations with the Sikhs had cooled considerably: and Eden, beyond the formal courtesies, ignored his existence.

Vincent found the tent full of khaki figures dotted about in groups; most of them discussing the volley into the transport lines, that had killed an orderly and wounded two *saises*, besides accounting for several mules.

As Vincent entered, he heard the voice of Jerry holding forth to a group of 'subs.' "I suppose this is what your blooming strategists call a 'war of attrition.' Sounds jolly imposing; but it *feels* jolly degrading to be potted like a partridge, with about as much chance of self-defence. Quite opened my eyes, it has, to the partridge's point of view. Hullo, Vinx!" He waved a greeting. "Got in safe? Good job they didn't succeed in attrishing you!"

Paul, who was among them, grasped Vincent's shoulder. "Vinx and I had our share at tea-time, didn't we, old chap? Some one else's turn to-night."

And dinner being announced, the men sat down to a meal less imposing, though certainly not less cheerful than its counterpart in the station Mess of friendly memories. All were in good spirits; the Sikhs jubilant; the 51st envious, though they had had their turn a week ago. Shots sounded in the distance; then nearer; and there was a general shout of laughter when the first bullet ripped through the canvas, knocking a pile of plates out of a kitmutgar's hands, and sending his dignity to the winds.

Others followed at intervals; quite a serious epidemic. It almost ceased to be amusing, though they

continued to treat it as a joke; and Vincent, glancing round the table, wondered how many of them, under their casual exteriors, were haunted by the unnerving whisper, "Which of us next?" It was worse, in many ways, than open fight. The rush up the Sampagha cliffs had been a matter of screwing courage to the sticking-point; a few moments at high tension and then relief. But these dinner-table amenities involved the continuous strain of danger coolly recognised and as coolly ignored.

"Not much fun this, is it?" Paul Desmond's voice, at his elbow, interrupted his thoughts; and he felt absurdly grateful for that confession from such a quarter. "The epidemic seems local, though. Blake and Myles over there are in a hot corner. Did you see the last one go clean under Blake's arm? Turned pea-green, poor chap, and his eyeglass dropped into his plate! Father ought to suggest general post. Make things fairer. There—good heavens!"

It was almost a volley this time—in the 'hot corner' again. Wood of the 51st fell back and changed colour; a bullet through his upper arm. Another ricochetted harmlessly against Jerry's shoulder, and a third whinged past Blake so close that only an involuntary jerk saved him from being hit.

As Alton hurried round to take charge of Wood, Blake pushed back his chair. "Blooming unhealthy corner, this!" he remarked, with a short laugh. "Can you fellows make room for a little one over there?"

At that, to the surprise of his brother officers, Eden rose from his chair at the quiet end.

"You're welcome to my seat," he said gruffly. "Nothing ever touches *me*."

Blake's confusion was manifest. "Awfully good of you," he muttered. "I—I didn't mean——"

"Oh, that's all right."

The impersonal tone precluded further comment or thanks; and in silence the two men changed places, Eden sat down by Jerry in Wood's empty chair; while Blake took his vacant seat directly opposite Vincent.

who discerned, beneath his rather forced liveliness, the immensity of his relief.

For the next five minutes things went normally and tension relaxed. Then St John's orderly announced Subadar Afzul Khan anxious for speech with the Colonel Sahib concerning snipers above their camp.

Permission being given, he entered and begged leave to submit to the Colonel Sahib that those devils up aloft could soon be stalked and silenced by himself and his friend Fuzl Ali Khan. Would the Colonel Sahib grant him leave to put off his uniform and become, for a few hours, an Afridi on his native hills? "*Hazúr*, I know the chances," he concluded, "and my friend knows his own folk. If we return not with four good rifles, besides our own, in God's name I will forfeit the medals I wear."

St John's approval showed in his eyes. "A soldierly offer, Subadar Sahib," he answered, and turned to Desmond. "What do *you* say to it, General?"

"I say *shahbash*. The sooner the better," Sir Theo answered promptly, and with a smart salute the man turned on his heel.

"Good sportin' feller that," Blake drawled, adjusting his eyeglass. But before his neighbour could answer—"Bang! Whizz!" Another bullet crashed through the tent, and Vincent with an indrawn breath sat rigid. For the thing whistled past his temple, stirring his hair, and hit Blake full between the eyes.

Without a sound, and with scarcely a contortion, the cavalry man fell face downward: and, for the space of a heart-beat, not a man at the table spoke or moved.

Then Alton—back again by now—hurriedly left his seat, though well he knew that Blake was already past any help of his. Still, because man hopes always against hope, he laid his fingers on the inert wrist.

"It was instantaneous," he said, addressing no one in particular. "A mercy, anyway. Poor chap!"

Inarticulate murmurs echoed that sentiment; while

Alton and two others reverently lifted up the dead man —whom living, few had reverenced—and went out of the tent.

Death on the battlefield has its halo of nobility and sacrifice: but here was sheer pathos, the deeper, perhaps, because so few present felt more than the common human shock at the sight of sudden death.

Vincent himself had Eden more on his mind than Blake. Instinctively he glanced down the table as that silent group left the tent; and the unguarded look of envy he caught in the living man's eyes seemed to him a thing infinitely more tragic than the dead man's swift and painless end.

Very early next morning—a morning of white frost veiled with the breath of the mountains—all troops detailed for the Warán valley were very much on the move; and as Colonel St John stepped out of his tent he nearly stumbled over five rifles laid at his door.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, and looking up from that welcome man-trap was accosted by a smart double salute.

"Colonel Sahib, was it well done?" The words were less a question than a statement. Afzul Khan was not troubled with modesty, and he knew he had achieved a good night's work. "The devils were cunning devils: hard to catch. But if only by reason of my medals, they were doomed."

"It was excellently done," St John told him. "Those rifles shall not go to the general store. They shall remain in the Pultan for a remembrance of your service."

Another double salute and the Afridis went about their business. To avenge injuries inflicted on a few British officers, they had stalked their own people half the night: an act the better worth recording because it is no exception; but typical, rather, of the spirit of the Indian Army at its best.

While the sun still kept his foot upon the hills, the brigade and its tail of impedimenta streamed out of

camp towards the valley of Warán. On the low pass of Tseri Kandáo, some three miles on, they dropped the Sikhs to keep communication open between the two forces and to cover the returning brigade: for the Afridi seldom gives trouble till troops are on the homeward march. The Warán Expedition proved no exception to the rule; and the name of that insignificant pass was destined to be linked for ever with the name of St John and his Sikhs.

CHAPTER IV.

"Gift this guerdon and grant this grace
That I bid good e'en,
The sword in my hand and my foot to the race,
The wind in my teeth and the rain in my face—
'Be it so,' said the Queen—"

VINCENT had thoroughly enjoyed his brief sojourn on the Tseri Pass; not least because it brought him a much-travelled letter from Sir Thakur Das, who had written twice since their parting and had then disappeared for months into the region of Tibet, where he had talked with Llamas and found among them many veritable children of light. Rumours of increasing Border trouble had filtered through to his fastnesses of peace; and now he reappeared in the world of Anglo-India, to find that mere risings had swelled into a minor war. Browsing on back numbers of Punjab papers, he had read, with a touch of keen personal interest, glowing tributes to the heroic conduct of a certain regiment on the Samana and to the gallant leading of its officers. Mention of Miss Desmond's presence at Gulistan had set him wondering about that doubtful gleam of hope; for he was a very human saint at heart: and now he wrote of both, in his own characteristic fashion, that translated Vincent from a service tent, to a pilgrim's camp fire on the heights below Kedarnath.

"When I bid you prepare for battle, my friend, I had no thought how soon the reality would be upon you; nor how soon you would arrive to fulfil the

promise of manhood I discerned beneath the shrinking of your sensitive spirit from the clash and stress of action. Have you discovered, now, the wisdom of my hard counsel, that the soul gains truest freedom through accepting the bondage of action? For thus saith the Upánishad: 'In the midst of activity alone wilt thou desire to live a hundred years.' Have you yet attained to that desire, my *chela* in the spirit? Has there been fulfilment, also, of the hope that perhaps made choice easier on that your night of decision? There is mention of a name in Gulistan Fort; and the question came in my mind—is it possible? And am I sufficiently your friend to make such intimate enquiry? If so, when you have leisure from sword and pistol, I shall look eagerly for affirmation in this matter. Better union could not be."

The desired affirmation was despatched from Tseri Kandáo. The letter itself went to swell an already plethoric packet to Peshawur; and upon the day marked for a general return to camp, leisure from sword and pistol came abruptly to an end.

The first harbinger of coming storm was Eden. His dismay at the prospect of kicking his heels in the pass had moved St John—who very well understood—to lend him to another Sikh regiment, which chanced to be short of officers, on the condition that he should rejoin before the homeward march, that would probably entail rearguard duty for his own corps. On the preceding evening, therefore, he reappeared in decidedly better spirits; having witnessed the demolishing of Saiad Akbar's house and taken part in a brush with the Aka Khel Afridis, who resented the liberty. They and the *Z*akkas, he prophesied, meant to give the whole returning brigade 'a hot time.'

Next morning early, that other Sikh regiment arrived to take over the pass. St John's orders were to move on and disperse his companies along the hills commanding the road to camp. Finally, when all were through, they would join the rearguard, as flankers, and shepherd the wanderers home. This

might or might not prove a critical business. It was one for which the 9th Sikhs had already earned themselves a high reputation.

They proceeded, accordingly, to spread themselves out on either side of a deep ravine. Two companies, under Eden and Vincent, were stationed nearest the pass, with Howard opposite, and the Colonel some way farther along. There they waited, with the disciplined patience of the soldier on duty, while troops and transport animals, bearing the precious forage collected in Warán, trailed leisurely back to headquarters.

It was three of the afternoon before the end of that crawling column hove into view, followed up by Gordons and Gurkhas—never happier than when linked for duty.

"Rearguard at last, thank God!" Eden greeted them piously from his perch above. "Our turn now. 'Fraid it may be dark before we're in."

"Oh, I *hope* not," Vincent said with heartfelt emphasis. "But ought we to be moving before the others are clear of the pass?"

Eden shrugged. "General's orders. Rather puzzled the Colonel. But it's none of our business. Hullo—the Gurkha-*lóg* seem rather crocked up."

It was true. The brave little men had endured a hard day of it, and were fairly exhausted, besides being hampered by casualties. Promptly St John signalled an order, bidding his own men stand to, till the Gurkhas had got well past. So they waited on, up aloft; while the cold increased and the sun dipped rapidly towards the hills. Then, most thankfully, at the given signal, they turned their faces homeward.

But they had not gone far before shots and yells behind them announced that the other Sikhs must have been assaulted while moving down from the pass. Eden came to a dead halt, and Vincent's heart sank into his boots.

"You going back?" he asked casually.

"Rather!" Eden's tone was dogged, his face alert. "Bet the Colonel will, orders or no orders. Splendid

fighting lot! Damn shame leaving 'em in the lurch. Only three hundred strong; and all divided up holding the pass. Hark at the fiends!"

For the shots and yells had increased; and the sun's last rays flashed a signal from the 15th Sikhs that retirement was impossible without help.

"That'll bring the Colonel along double-quick," remarked Eden. "And there's Howard's on the move. But we'll be the first."

Back on their tracks they hurried, as fast as steep and broken ground would allow: and there, on the wooded ridge, they found the 15th—a bare hundred of them—defying a force of two or three times their number. The ground between them and the wood, that held the enemy, was strewn with Afridis dead or dying; and the three companies of brother Sikhs, hurrying to their aid, were greeted with cheers.

Thus strengthened, their first thought was for the wounded. Once get them safe into the valley, and they that were whole could make a retreating fight of it at worst. Quietly and rapidly, in the growing dusk, they made their dispositions: but at the first sign of a backward move that sinister wood came to life again; and Afridis swarmed down upon them, howling defiance. For one horrid moment it seemed to Vincent as if all his pulses had stopped dead: the next, he was in the heart of the *melée*, using his sword none the less vigorously because he shrank whenever human flesh yielded under its blade. All around him Sikhs and Afridis were fighting, liker fiends than men; the front ranks practically hand to hand. But from behind the knives and the bayonets, rifles rang out.

Back and down they moved, disputing every foot of ground, while the wounded were being hurried into comparative safety, regardless of mortal pain. And still others kept falling; till, out of a hundred and twenty, thirty had been removed to the rear. Now it was the Colonel of the 15th Sikhs, wounded in the face; now a Native Officer, shot dead; now a sepoy, crumpled up with a bullet in his body; and now

Jerry with a hand to his head, blood on his tunic, and a wry smile as he passed Vincent in the dusk.

"Beggar wanted to relieve me of my head," he explained. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

But he was not back in a jiffy. And still that nightmare struggle went on: very brief in reality: but to Vincent an eternity of mingled excitement and fear. While his aboriginal self fought on instinctively, with revolver or sword, his detached self registered sights and sensations a great deal too vividly for comfort.

Life was dearer to him now than ever he could have believed; and happiness, like conscience, makes cowards of us all.

Eden was near him most of the time—untroubled by any self detached from the business in hand. And he had a vision of Howard towering above his men; cheering them on; fighting with the superb *élan* that one would expect from Howard in the field. Vincent had never admired him more——

Back, still back: but the Afridis' fire was decreasing now. Their onslaught had been prompted by the certainty of wholesale massacre; and they had no stomach for the cool disciplined fire of the Sikhs. The ragged line wavered, broke, and fell away toward the wood: and it was possible to draw breath again: not for long.

A stone wall lower down the hill seemed a promising breastwork for the next stand: and behind it five very weak companies were drawn up by Eden, now in command of affairs. But for the wounded, down below, they could have managed a stubborn fighting retreat till they joined hands with the rest of the regiment: but none among them, if he could help it, would leave a comrade, dead or living, at the mercy of Pathans.

"We can hang on here for an hour or two, anyway," Eden said coolly. "Wonder what the deuce has come to the Colonel? Steady on, men. Those rascals are waking up again."

No onrush now: but volley and answering volley, at shorter and shorter range; till Sikhs and Afridis were

firing almost into each other's faces. Mercifully there was the wall. Vincent blessed that wall from the bottom of his heart. Crouched behind it, the Sikhs blazed away effectually, if indiscriminately: for no man could look over it without risk of instant death. Yet Vincent twice saw Eden deliberately stand up to issue an order, and crouch down again—untouched. The second time a bullet went through his helmet; that was all.

Hope of relief was dwindling fast, and ammunition faster still. It seemed simply a matter of hanging on till the last round; and then——

Through the sputter and crackle of firearms, other sounds emerged. Howard, kneeling behind a line of his men, looked sharply over his shoulder and recognised St John's tall figure breasting the hill.

"The Colonel Sahib!" he shouted, and the effect was magical. The man's mere arrival seemed a guarantee that the worst was over: and it so happened that the Afridis, discouraged for the moment, withdrew again into the wood.

Now, at last, it was possible to carry the wounded and still keep up a rearguard action as they went. The dead must perforce be left behind: and what that fiat meant to those who had witnessed the horrors of Saraghari, perhaps only a Sikh can understand.

Vincent hastened to discover Jerry, bandaged and in pain, but cheery as ever, and just able to walk with the help of a supporting arm. Twilight was already deepening to dusk. What it would be like after dark, in a country riddled with nullahs, none of them cared to think: except perhaps St John, whose thoughts, as always, proved very much to the point.

With the utmost caution, they began to move downhill. Not a sound came from the wood; not even a parting shot for benediction.

"They've had their fill of lead this last half hour, sir," Howard remarked to the Colonel; and St John smiled.

"Glad to hear it. You've all done splendidly. But

they must know we're cut off, and the chances are they're moving round to intercept us in the valley. I hope Williams arrives in time."

Half-way down, they met him, with two more companies, one of their own and one of the Dorsets.

"Where's Roddy?" Howard asked sharply.

"Left him with a few of ours and some Dorsets," Williams answered, "supporting a point farther along. Devilish nasty business this."

"Damn!" was Howard's sole rejoinder. He had counted on Roddy being in at the death; and he felt vaguely anxious, which was not his way. But there was no leisure to indulge in anxiety just then.

All the new arrivals were full of fight; but the conditions were not encouraging, even for the bravest. Hampered by their wounded, and still further hampered by darkness, the three miles on to camp might as well have been thirty for all their chance of covering them that night. The sudden silence of the enemy was not the least disturbing factor of the situation.

At the foot of the spur they halted, in total darkness; and St John, finding the regiments had become mixed, quietly gave the order to re-form. On either hand enclosing heights loomed darkly; and on a low ridge right before them, the ruins of a demolished village, burned that afternoon, glowed dull red against a violet-grey sky. Here and there a star trembled into life. Mercifully, in an hour the moon would be up.

"Creepy, isn't it?" Vincent whispered to Jerry, who sat down rather abruptly on a rock, and for answer leaned an aching head against his shoulder. After the strain and excitement of fighting for dear life, a horrid reaction set in. Darkness, penetrating cold, and that ominous silence made it increasingly difficult to keep courage at concert pitch. In plain truth, he was afraid, hideously afraid of what might happen next. It was the first time he had admitted the fact to himself without gloss and without shame: and that frank admission produced a surprising sense of ease. It was sheer relief to give up the strain of pretence; to admit,

like Charles Gordon, that he *was* afraid 'and very much so.' For, in that dark hour of suspense, he learnt that man conquers fear by acknowledging it and by realising that in spite of it he can still play up and play the game.

A movement from Jerry recalled him to actualities. "Wonder what the hell these devils are after?" he mused dreamily: and they were not left much longer in doubt.

Before the troops were well into shape, that ominous silence was shattered by a startling fusillade. From both flanks, and especially from those demolished houses on the ridge, came a hailstone chorus of bullets: and their message was plain to every man of St John's little force: "The Lord hath delivered you into our hands."

The whole thing was a striking example of Pathan swiftness and mobility; but the handful of British officers caught in that death-trap had no thought for anything but their own desperate plight. The ten weak companies of three different regiments, under St John's command, now numbered little more than two hundred; and these had forty wounded on their hands. Benighted in a treacherous ravine country, surrounded by Afridis, who would gain in numbers and daring as darkness deepened, any attempt to march into camp would only result in piecemeal annihilation. The fire was deadly and at close range. Men were dropping fast. Nothing could save them but a *coup de main:* and for such a crisis St John was the man. Vincent could just discern his tall figure standing a little ahead of his troops. For five seconds he stood so, cool and collected, then he spoke.

"Men, we will storm those houses on the hill and spend the night there. Fix bayonets!"

"Beastly job in the dark!" muttered Williams: but to the Sikhs no order could have been more welcome. This suited them better than rearguard fighting.

There was a brief pause. Sections fell out to guard the wounded. The 15th and Dorsets were told off to

take the right block of buildings, St John's men the left. Then his voice was heard again: "Are you ready? Charge!"

Unsheathing his sword, he sprang forward, and with a roar of enthusiasm his men sprang after him up the dark hillside; the rest keeping pace with them on the right.

Jerry, numb with cold and half fainting, had been consigned to an orderly; and Vincent was scrambling valiantly with the rest, keeping in close touch with Afzul Khan. The enemy's fire had ceased as abruptly as it began. Again the wolves of the Zakka Khel had promised themselves an orgie of slaughter; and again disappointment was their portion. An attack so swift, so daring, was not in the bond.

Had they bolted? Vincent wondered, as the Sikhs neared their goal: and, as if in answer to his thought, those smouldering houses greeted them with a rapid, deadly volley at fifteen yards.

The firing was too high for serious damage, but many of the advancing shadows fell. Vincent had a bullet through his helmet, another through his sleeve; yet he hardly noticed the fact. For he could just discern two tall figures leading the final onrush; and one had fallen. Impossible to tell which. Spurred by anxiety, he sprang forward; and almost before he knew it, he and his men were vaulting over charred walls into empty space.

The Afridis, after making their protest, had turned tail and fled.

There followed a few moments of utter confusion; and, in Vincent's case, of paralysing uncertainty. The excitement of the charge was over, and in the darkness one could be sure of nothing. Shadows of Sikhs and ever more Sikhs came tumbling over the walls. Stray shots rang out again; and in the midst of it all the Colonel's voice could be heard giving orders to entrench and throw up sangars with all possible speed.

Then it must be Howard who had fallen. That was Vincent's first thought; and the second, was he hurt

or killed? Death and Howard seemed a contradiction in terms; but, at best, he must be lying wounded on the frozen earth this bitter night. One moment Vincent stood still looking round him at scores of silhouettes obeying St John's command: the next, he started and almost screamed aloud.

A hand had gripped his ankle: the hand of a dark figure stretched on the ground. Click went his revolver trigger; and, in the same breath, the figure spoke.

"Vinx, you fool, don't fire!"

It was Howard's voice, with a catch in it that went to Vincent's heart. He was on his knees at once; but before he could speak, Howard went on hurriedly: "For God's sake find Alton. The brutes have got me this time—slick in the body. I just dragged myself in here. Potted one of the *Z*akkas as he ran. Get hold of Alton. Oh Lord—*why* isn't Roddy here?"

Vincent, half ashamed of not being Roddy, could only say: "I'll do my best, old chap. It's not easy. —Good heavens!" He sprang up hastily; for the roofless hut was filled with a sudden pandemonium of yells and madly fighting men.

"More of 'em, by God!" Howard's voice sounded like itself again. Dragging up on to his left elbow, he fumbled for his sword; while half a dozen Afridis—who seemed to have sprung out of the earth—were evincing a lively desire to escape from that nest of Sikhs.

Vincent let off his cocked revolver at one of them, and exulted when he saw the man fall. A few paces off he recognised Eden's figure trying conclusions with two enemy shadows bolder than the rest. Eden, he knew, had emptied his revolver during their last desperate stand: and now, while he parried one man's blow with his sword, the arm of the second was raised to strike. Quick as thought, Vincent sprang close up and fired right into the Pathan's face. The knife came down on Eden's shoulder instead of his head:

and as the Afridi fell forward, his companion vanished into the night.

With a groan, Eden dropped his sword and grasped his left arm; then, turning sharply, he confronted Vincent.

"Confound you, Leigh!" he muttered, and Vincent stood nonplussed. One could not very well apologise for saving a brother officer's life.

"We must find Alton," was all he could say. "Howard's hit, too—badly."

"Howard? Rot! Look at him!"

And Vincent looked in sheer amazement. By some superhuman power of the spirit, Howard had arisen and run a Pathan through the body. Now he stood over his victim, vainly trying to recover his sword.

"He *is* hit though," Vincent repeated. "Good Lord! It's a miracle."

But the miracle was almost spent. As Vincent slipped a supporting arm round him, Howard reeled and fell, bringing Vincent to his knees.

"Made me mad—being out of it," he gasped. "I want—my sword."

"Pull it out, will you, Eden?" Vincent said quickly, glad to escape the horrid job. "And hunt up Alton."

A whistle and a shout brought the indefatigable little doctor from a neighbouring hut.

"Two of us hit," said Eden. "Mine's nothing. It's Howard. Fainted, I think."

For some minutes Alton knelt beside the unconscious man, examining an obviously serious wound, as best he could, without daring to strike a light. Vincent could just see his face as a face when he looked up.

"Bad—is it?" he asked.

"Vital. Enough to have killed any ordinary fellow on the spot."

He was applying brandy to Howard's lips; and soon, with a great sigh, the wounded man opened his eyes.

"Roddy, old boy," he said thickly.

"Roddy's all safe, Howard," Vincent answered him. Alton had risen to examine Eden's shoulder and send for the Colonel.

"Vinx, is it?"

"Yes."

"I feel beastly queer, old chap. Done for this time." He caught his breath. "Give my love to Thea. You lucky devil! She's the world's best jewel. Tell her — it wasn't — I didn't — *she*'ll understand. *You* can stick to the regiment—now. Where's the Colonel?"

"They've sent for him." Tears that had pricked Vincent's eyeballs ran unheeded down his cheeks.

"Good. Tell Roddy — my sword — oh, *damn* it all——!"

A spasm shook him. His hand, that had grasped Vincent's, fell away limply;—and almost before the other knew it, he was gone.

At the Colonel's approach, Vincent rose unsteadily. He was cold and hungry and miserable; and the familiar world of camp seemed a hundred leagues away. Nothing seemed actual but darkness and death and the weapons of death.

He saw the Colonel kneel by that which had been Howard; saw his hand rest, as if in benediction, on the crisp, rough hair. Then he, too, rose and realised Vincent's presence.

"The Queen has lost a very gallant soldier," was all he said as he turned away; but in his heart he knew that he himself had lost not only his most valued officer, but that rare thing among men, a junior who was almost a friend.

When he had gone, Vincent sat down on a hummock of earth near by and absently watched the golden advent of the moon. Slowly she emerged from darkness, like a spirit rising out of a tomb; and her appearance marked an end of serious molestation. Intermittent firing went on till midnight: but their buildings were well entrenched against possible attacks. It only remained to wait on that bitter

hill-top till morning, with little of food or extra clothing to fortify them against fifteen degrees of frost; and what the wounded suffered, the wounded only knew. All night long, St John himself went from group to group, speaking quiet words of encouragement: and all night long Vincent kept vigil, on that hummock of earth, beside the man whose face became clearer as the moon brightened — so clear and so peaceful, in its unalterable repose, that it was hard not to believe he merely slept.

Soon after St John left, Eden came up, neatly bandaged, an empty sleeve pinned to his breast. There was a moment of awkward hesitation. Then he held out his hand.

"Vinx, you're a brick," he said gruffly. "Beastly ungracious of me—I apologise."

It took Vincent a few seconds to collect himself. "Oh—that," he said. "Don't trouble. I knew you didn't mean it."

"I did mean it," Eden retorted without shame: and Vincent was silent, seeking some poor word of encouragement.

"There's Flop, you know, in Peshawur," he ventured shyly. "Waiting for you—asking for you——"

Eden cleared his throat. "Poor little atom! She'd soon forget."

"She'd miss, all her life, what only you can give her. By the way——," he fumbled in his breast-pocket, "I've another little letter for you. Came yesterday." His fingers found it. "They're as good as gold, Thea says."

Eden pocketed that morsel of paper covered with scriggles and kisses. Even Flop was but a precious legacy. His heart ached for the woman.

"God bless Thea," he said gravely. "Where'd they have been without her? Where'd any of us have been, I wonder?" He was silent, looking down at the inert, powerful figure, and at a glint of moonlight on the unsheathed sword.

"Life's a queer business," he mused. "You and

I—talking like this. Howard—lying there. And he'd set his heart on commanding the regiment——"

He turned abruptly away; and Vincent was left alone again with the moonlight and his silent companion, of whom his overwrought brain was too poignantly aware. For this self-imposed vigil involved more than a mere impulse of human fellowship prompted by the hope that Howard might still know and care. It involved conquest over an inherent weakness of his own nature. The experiences of the past few months had gone far to make a true soldier of him; and in the process he had shed many disabilities; but he still suffered much gratuitous misery from his acute sympathy with the wounded and his innate shrinking from contact with the dead. It was this shrinking that he set himself to conquer now; and as the snail-paced hours wore on, that very natural dread was submerged in an overwhelming sense of the pathos, the utter insignificance, of the whole human drama; of things present and things to come; of the relentless machinery of Life and Death that grinds and grinds and grinds—to what ultimate end?

Through such a night of vigil, under the chill serenity of the moon, with her cohort of stars, winking derision, that devil's question is ill to combat; worst of all, when night dwindles to the small hours of morning and the tides of being are at their lowest ebb. But not in vain had Vincent spent that other moonlight vigil under the peak of Mahápanth.

So now—though the chill of frost numbed his body and the chill of doubt numbed his heart—he wrestled stoutly with the evil thing, and with his own nameless dread, till his conquering spirit flamed like a beacon in the dark:—and the first promise of morning gleamed along the eastward hills.

That gleam was the signal for a move, skilfully planned and successfully carried out, under hot but erratic fire that did little harm. Roddy and his party, picked up by the way, greeted them with a shout of

welcome. Then Vincent saw the Colonel slip a hand through Maclean's arm—and was heartily thankful that he could see no more.

A relief brigade met them soon after and bore them joyfully back to camp, where all night long guiding lights had flashed and regimental bugle calls had sounded—in vain. The tale of that night, however simply and soldierly told, was one to stir every heart. Nor could all St John's native reticence conceal the fact that except for his own inspired and inspiring leadership, few, if any, would have returned alive.

CHAPTER V.

"Now the weak impulse and the blind desire
Give way at last, to the all-conquering will.
. . . . . .
The soul has won that freedom born of fire,
. . . . . .
And a new courage that shall never tire."
—H. R. FRESTON.

"GLORY Hallelujah! This *is* a hell of a place. Nice little chance for the gentlemen up above to send us all to blazes. Oh Lord, there's a batch of baggage mules gone splash again. That means two hours' rest cure to reckon up our sins!"

The speaker was Jerry Myles, sufficiently recovered from his wound of three weeks earlier to 'carry on' intermittently; and the place he anathematized was the six-mile defile of Dwatoi—the worst specimen of its kind to be found outside Afghanistan. Vincent was just ahead of him on the narrow track. He had been active in helping distracted transport drivers, and was wet through to the waist.

"I told you, didn't I?" said he. "But this sort of thing can only be properly appreciated at first hand."

"Right you are! Personally, second-hand experience would have been exciting enough for me. Quite grateful to my wound, I am, for saving me from a double dose of Dwatoi. U-ugh!"

He shivered; and tucking his poshtin well under him, sat down upon a rock to await the pleasure of the submerged mules, who had called a halt to a third of

the transport column and the rearguard—including, as usual, the 9th Sikhs.

Vincent sat down by him; and they chewed emergency sticks of chocolate and sipped brandy and water to keep themselves warm. For it was an evening of early December, and a bitter wind ushered in a night of frost. Only that morning they had turned their backs, at last, on the valley of Maidan; not a day too soon. For the gathering clouds that threatened rain in the Bara Valley, meant snow in Maidan. Jerry's allusion to the double dose of Dwatoi referred to an earlier exploration of this unknown region, shortly after the Tseri Kandâo adventure, when the Sikhs had again distinguished themselves. Vincent, in particular, had won praise from St John that more than atoned for hours of wading in ice-cold water and three days of the stiffest marching he had ever known.

They had been thankful, all of them, for hard work to distract their minds from a loss felt keenly by every officer and man. From the Colonel downward, they had fallen into the way of looking to Howard in any emergency, small or great, of deferring to his opinion, and submitting, quite cheerfully, to his high-handed and thoroughly capable way with them all. His death had left a blank in the Regiment that would not soon be filled. Even Eden, the one heretic, had become a partial convert in the last few months; and the change in Roddy was heart-breaking to see. In an Indian regiment, where British officers are few, the family feeling is peculiarly strong: and this particular family had, for years, been the happier and the better for those two favoured members of it: for their devotion, their vitality, their big wholesome laughter, and their zest for work and play.

Since the Dwatoi reconnaissance, a spell of rest—more needed than appreciated—had been their portion, while Desmond scoured the remaining valleys with other troops, in pursuance of his promise to visit every tribal district, either as friend or foe, whichever his visitors decreed. To this end, one brigade or

another had been kept constantly on the move. But if Desmond spared others little, he spared himself less; and the incessant strain of responsibility, thought, and action had brought on more than one relapse. Nevertheless, his old resilience still served him well: and whatever he asked of his troops, they were willing and proud to carry through, under one who always 'meant business,' and who understood Frontier war, as war, not as a military promenade. That last accounted also for much of Desmond's personal power over the tribes themselves. The rough justice he meted out to them *was* justice, as they best understood the word; and by now only the incurable fighters among them continued to stand aloof.

These men, unhappily, had it in their power to make his bold, independent march down the unexplored Bara Valley a critical and even disastrous affair, unless superlatively well carried out. But Desmond had faith in the tried troops and commandants of his 2nd Division; and his habit of expecting the best from his subordinates was a very real factor in their success and his own. The 1st Division, having returned to Mastura, would move towards the same point by another route. Lines of communication had been dispensed with. Both forces were to march in light order, as unsupported flying columns, till they joined hands with the troops at Maimani—eighteen miles from Peshawur and less than a week's journey from Maidan.

Only Desmond himself, and certain other Frontier veterans, foresaw the trifling drawbacks of a move that would have all the appearance of a retreat, and would be harassed accordingly. The rest merely anticipated 'a rather rocky time of it'; a few more turns of the familiar programme; then the well-earned reward of merit—beds, bungalows, tubs, and the common decencies of life.

Among these were Vincent and Jerry, chewing chocolate and sipping diluted brandy on their boulder in the defile.

"The rockiest thing in marches that the devil him-

self could have invented!" quoth Jerry, glancing up with awe at the heights that hemmed them in. "At this rate, we'll eat our Christmas dinner with the Zakkas. 'Bet we don't see camp to-night." As the first block of baggage had lasted a clear four hours, the threat of a second justified these lamentations of Jeremiah. "See those rascals prowling along the skyline," he went on, indicating them with his chocolate. "What's to prevent 'em extinguishing us if we're stuck here for the night?"

That thought, happily, had entered older heads than Jerry's. The rascals along the skyline had been effectually reasoned with in advance: and, treachery apart, their safe conduct to Dwatoi assured.

Vincent, looking up also at those prowling silhouettes, noticed a solitary shadow zigzagging downward by some invisible thread of path.

"Here comes one of your rascals," he remarked. "A plucky one, venturing right into the lion's jaws."

"Wonder what's his little game," mused the doubtful Jerry.

"Throat-cutting on the grand scale!" suggested Vincent, in blood-curdling tones. "A desperate villain! Look at him."

The figure that reached the river was bearded, and muffled in a blanket. It was armed with an earthen pot; and there, among scores of inimical sepoys, it squatted by the water's edge, quietly filling its vessel, as though the troops in that congested defile were but an army of shadows.

"I like that old chap," said Vincent. "I'm going to make his acquaintance." And Jerry looked after him, marvelling at the ever-inscrutable Vinx.

"Salaam, friend. May you never grow weary," Vincent greeted the intruder, Pathan-fashion, as he set his brimming chatty on the path. "Have you no fear, coming alone and unarmed into the midst of your enemies?"

The old man slipped a hand significantly under the folds of his blanket. "I would not go unarmed among

my friends, Sahib. But among troops of the British Sirkar what need of fear? The General Sahib hath spoken. Those who do no injury shall receive none. It is enough."

And Vincent thought he had seldom heard a finer tribute to his race.

"The Sirkar's troops are safe, also, in this region," the Pathan went on, casting a friendly glance around him. "We elders of the Malikdin Khel have sworn. And the young ones are all gone, over the hills, too far away.

"No trouble for us, then, on the road to India?"

"Not in our region, Sahib. But beyond"—he turned his hands about—"in the Bara Valley the wolves of the Zakka Khel are gathering in all whose desire is for loot and slaughter. A great *lashkar*. Ten thousand—twelve thousand. God knows. The young care only for fighting. May the Sahib suffer no hurt!"

And picking up his vessel that straight-spoken minor prophet returned by the way he had come.

He was no false one, as events proved; neither was Jerry as regards their immediate fate. By midnight they had succeeded in covering three miles; and were condemned to bivouac on some providential terraces cut out of less precipitous hills.

Next morning they repeated their programme, with the addition of worse roads and a steady drizzle of rain. While St John and Roddy, superlative sheep-dogs, swept up the last of the stragglers, Jerry and Vincent enjoyed a more forward position in that drenched and dismal throng. Even so, it was near noon when they trailed into Dwatoi camp—a wide river-reach, commanded by holly-jungled hills that merged, on the western horizon, into the snow-line of the Safed Koh.

From a jutting promontory the inevitable stone tower dominated the valley; and every available terrace had its crop of tents or transport lines, where even bear-coated mules and ponies were stamping to

keep themselves warm. A watery gleam of sunshine made feeble amends for hours of drizzle that had soaked every one to the skin; and blazing camp fires, in all directions, diffused a good deal more cheerfulness than warmth. Already the truce of Dwatoi was broken, as the prophet had foretold. The pickets of the advance-guard had been kept well occupied all night: and puffs of smoke, up among the firs and holly bushes, told of Gurkha scouts chasing snipers from cover to cover. Every man not otherwise employed was out after fuel; for here they must halt two more nights, while Desmond carried fire and sword up the valley of a clan that preferred ruined homesteads to parting with their rifles.

"Not much picnic about this little show!" Jerry remarked ruefully, as he and Vincent rounded the promontory, with their bedraggled contingent, wet, hungry, and chilled to the bone. "Even the lordly Staff officers paddling around in three feet of water!"

As he spoke, Paul Desmond splashed up to them, wet to the waist, but serene as ever.

"Good business!" he cried, clapping a hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Father was getting a trifle anxious. Come along to our camp. You too, Myles. Tail end of tiffin going and only three infantile rivers to cross!"

The magic word tiffin would have carried them, uncomplaining, through half a dozen full-grown rivers; and for Vincent, Desmond's fatherly welcome was better than all..

He was not allowed much time, however, to enjoy either. While an Elysian curry was in progress, Finlay sauntered in: Finlay, by the way, had emerged as one of the finest fighting Generals of the force. There was trouble, it seemed, with another nest of spitfires about two miles up the valley.

"If we occupy that point," he explained to Desmond, "we relieve pressure on the Borderer pickets and cover

your advance in the morning." His deliberate gaze lighted on Vincent and dwelt there. "All your men safe in, Leigh?"

"All but two companies, sir, on rearguard with the Colonel and Maclean."

"Bless that Colonel! Pretty dead—are you? Game for another move?"

"Game for anything, sir," Vincent answered with a ready alertness that made both Finlay and Desmond wonder—can this be the Vincent of Kohat?

"Good. This is the very job for your Sikhs. Nice neat little job for one company. Stiffish climb. Plenty of cover. Kudos, if it's artistically carried out. I give you five minutes to swallow all you can; and you must take the rest in your haversack. Rations and poshtins, mind. You'll be up there all night."

"And change your wet clothes before starting," was the decree of the General Commanding the Forces. "Good luck to you, Vincent."

His men—a mixed company of Sikhs and Pathans—received the order with evident satisfaction: and in less than half an hour they were plodding after Vincent up a broken pathway; poshtins strapped across their backs; caring nothing for another night in the open, could they but secure a good 'bag' of Afridis to boast of on their return.

In the mind of their leader was little thought of boasting: though pride was there, legitimate pride, at having been chosen by Finlay—who had known him at his worst—for an independent affair that might very well demand coolness and resource if it were to be artistically carried through.

The new spirit of keenness and confidence that had emerged from the fight on the pass and the vigil beside Howard's body, was very much in command of things as he climbed the rocky slope with sixty good men at his heels. It carried him forward, tired and chilled though he was, and far from relishing the prospect of another night in the open. It spurred him on to prove worthier of Thea and of the name he bore.

An hour's climbing brought the crest into view; and with it the discovery that his task was no mere matter of clearing a few sangars under cover of a mountain battery; but of carrying a strongly held and extremely unpleasant-looking position, extending over a mile of front. Finlay must have been misinformed. His 'nice neat little job' looked more like a miniature Dargai; and how sixty men, led by one slightly disconcerted subaltern, were going to capture those heights Vincent could not for the life of him conceive. He stood confounded, not merely by the strength of the enemy, but by the fact that he must use his own initiative and issue his own orders. That very necessity, coming at a critical moment, had been the making of a hundred others before him; and it was the making of Vincent now. A situation that would have unnerved him two months earlier, found him disconcerted indeed, but resolute to pull the thing through and justify the General of his choice. Moreover he was particularly anxious to do it off his 'own bat'; proof, in itself, that he had made big strides of late.

But it looked as if a good many more 'bats' would be needed to win that formidable crest. A slight move on his part might induce the Afridis to reveal their strength; and standing clear of cover, for a moment, he took a rapid survey of things through his glasses. Promptly the whole ridge spat flame; and from both flanks bullets whistled: "Fool! the game is ours." One glanced harmlessly off the buckle of his belt. One split a stone at his feet, and the sharp splinters struck his face, making him retreat with alacrity behind his dwarf ilex bushes.

"We must signal for reinforcements, Subadar Sahib,' he said decisively, and the Afridi smiled.

"That I knew before the Sahib risked his life to draw their fire. The quicker the better, *Hazúr*. Too soon it will be dark; and one Tseri Kandáo is enough!"

"Yes, indeed. Flag the message. Meantime we'll do what we can."

They proceeded to do it with a vigour and boldness that excited the admiration of Finlay and his staff, watching from below, and realising that three companies would have been nearer the mark. But England and England's leaders have a knack of sending out too few men upon big errands: a knack responsible for some of the most heroic chapters in her history.

Finlay now sent up a company of Gurkhas, led by a subaltern of proven gallantry and promise. It took them a full hour to join hands with the Sikhs; and even so the two boys had a brave and perilous task before them.

Said the Gurkha subaltern: "Wish to goodness we could threaten their flank. But we'll take 'em in alternate rushes. The beggars are shooting horrid straight."

So they took them in alternate rushes: but 'the beggars' continued to shoot 'horrid straight,' though the battery dropped shells into them with beautiful precision. No shame to Vincent if his heart quaked within him, when his own rushes more than once took him so close to the sangars that his men were hit by stones flung over the walls: while those below commended the extreme coolness of the subalterns in command.

But the Afridis clung to their strong position with unusual obstinacy: till, of a sudden, those dauntless subalterns became aware of a change, less immediately significant to Vincent than to his more experienced companion.

"Lord be praised!" he cried, "we've *got* 'em in flank after all! One more rush does it. All together this time, Leigh."

Vincent drew a sharp breath between his teeth. "Good," he said. "Come along!"

And they came along, in magnificent style, with a

composite Sikh and Gurkha yell; right up to the sangars; up and over:—and the position was theirs.

A few 'pot shots' after the flying Afridis; a shout of recognition from Vincent's men; and he found himself being congratulated by the Colonel and Maclean, whom he had parted from in the defile at dawn.

"All the Colonel's doing," declared Roddy, whose kind ugly face looked more natural than it had done since the light went out of it three weeks ago. (St John was engaged with the Gurkha 'sub.') "The minute we got into camp we heard what was up, and he saw in a twinkling that a flank attack would do the trick. No time wasted on tiffin or waiting for orders. He just told me casually he was off with a company over some cheerful-looking hills. I begged leave to come; and we've made quite a smart affair of it between us, eh? We'll see you two thoroughly sangared and then get back again."

It was dusk before they left; and at parting, St John had a few words of praise for Vincent that warmed his heart, though nothing availed to warm his body through the bitter hours of the night that followed. They held their hard-won eyrie, unmolested, till Desmond had completed his programme. Then they returned to camp and congratulations. It was only a small affair, and the loss trifling: but the attack had been led with such skill and spirit that Finlay complimented both subalterns officially; and Vincent, who dined at headquarters, had his more personal share of praise from Sir Theo and Paul.

"I shall write my Twin a few lines to-night that will make her lovely eyes shine!" the former told him privately. "We're sending on some runners to Peshawur; though whether they'll ever get through is for the Zakkas to say."

Vincent, also, must write a few lines, before turning in, to her who had so eloquently upheld the soldier's calling in their firelight talk a year ago. The music of her voice sounded clearly in his

brain: "I am sure, utterly sure, it would be your salvation!" How superbly right she was—in that as in everything else! And how completely she, herself, had been the salvation of his manhood and his life.

Sitting down to his letter, in that mood of exalted worship, he wrote in a bold hand across the top of the page: "To Althea—'who may command him anything.'" And to Althea he poured out the fulness of his devotion; his joy in the present, his hopes for the future, that yet might make a veritable soldier of him such as her heart desired.

"Only four more days," he wrote, "and we shall all be at Maimani, clamouring for a week's leave to Peshawur. And then—then, I'll have the reward of rewards! Though goodness knows General Finlay's approval and your father's praise are far beyond any deserts of mine. Some day, perhaps, I'll prove myself more worthy of them. Who knows? Having managed to win you, I feel bold enough to aspire to the skies."

It was his first taste of the sweets of achievement. He wanted more: and he got even more than he wanted within the next twenty-four hours.

At dawn, on the 10th of December, the move towards India began in earnest. Winter was too far advanced for any further chastisement by the way. Those who remained obdurate were threatened with Desmond's return in the spring: his present aim being to get his force out of the country in the shortest possible space of time. There were but thirty-five miles to cover now: presumably a matter of four marches, enlivened by rearguard amenities; actually, an intermittent general engagement, all along the line, with the best guerilla fighters on earth.

The starting of the last baggage train was the signal; and even before all the pickets were drawn in, the fun began.

To-day it was Sikhs and Gurkhas to the front: but the Zakka Khels, though partial to rearguards, provided fun enough for all. Vincent and Eden, with two flanking companies, had their work cut out clearing the wooded hills on the right. No level ridges these; but a series of peaks that, each in turn, must be climbed, cleared and held, till the moment arrived to repeat the operation *ad infinitum*. Far below them, the surging mass of men and animals splashed through the river-bed or tramped over stony flats: a huge, slow-moving target, at which the Afridi, hidden and secure, could blaze away to his heart's content. The sole guide to his own whereabouts was the 'phit-phit' of his Lee-Metford; and even then, to mark him down and dislodge him was only to hear the derisive crack of his rifle from fresh cover, half a mile away.

Yet all that could be done against such will-o'-wisps Desmond's flankers and skirmishers did. From hill to hill they were harried by Eden and Vincent on that December morning. It was exciting work; but it taxed the energies of the strongest, and Vincent was hampered by the ache of fever in his bones: the result of two inclement nights, and two days of what Jerry called 'dead-marching,' wet through, in the teeth of a bitter wind. Most often their quarry eluded them: and they met with little real opposition till early afternoon, when a bend of the stream revealed a fortified village, bristling with towers, set upon a terraced plateau at the base of a spur.

Here, at last, it seemed as if the Zakkas meant to make a stand; and the British troops were more than willing to accommodate them. From terrace to terrace the Sikhs skirmished, in open order, while covering batteries shelled the village; and with Afridis a little of that particular argument goes a long way. After a brisk fusillade, honour was satisfied; and the skirmishers, with a roar of triumph, swarmed over the last ridge into the village itself.

Then it was flanking again, till they reached their chosen camping ground, where snipers in plenty

greeted them from the surrounding heights. These must be cleared and picketed, while troops and their impedimenta trailed into camp, and foraging parties helped themselves from the nearest villages, and the sun dropped behind the hills.

Vincent, with a Havildar and twenty men, had been told off to seize and occupy a commanding sangar: after that, rest or no rest, according to the mood of the Zakka Khels. By this time he felt decidedly feverish, and had been hoping for a night in camp after a phenomenally hard day's work. Intermittent flashes above and around him winked in derision of his weariness. His particular sangar seemed to be strongly held; and he did not appreciate the amount of cover in its vicinity.

It was a stiff climb, and twilight was vanishing fast. On the way up, being a little ahead of his men, he paused and looked down at the scene below: the river flowing darkly between its banks; the patches of tents denoting regimental camps; the friendly gleam of wood fires, like great rubies set in the gathering dusk; and men, the controlling forces of the whole picture, dwarfed to the semblance of black beetles scurrying to and fro. On other hills, beside his own, more smoke-wreaths and jets of flame showed where other pickets were fighting for their posts; and overhead, dark curtains of cloud blotted out the first tremulous stars, hastening the approach of night.

"Only four days more," was his thought; and as he turned to finish his climb the first drops of rain began to fall.

"Damn!" he said aloud: and the next moment—"Crack, crack!"—two shots rang out from a clump of bushes above, and Vincent pitched sideways, hitting his head against a rock.

Dizzy and half stunned, he tried to rise; only to discover, with a stab of pain, that his left leg was useless. His first feeling was a confused irritation, only a few degrees stronger than that produced by the rain. His first thought: "Well, anyway I'll be

taken back to camp." Then, "Confound the brute!" he muttered; and the confounded one—as if he had heard—took prompt revenge.

Two more shots rang out; and almost before Vincent realised he had been hit, dusk was swallowed up of darkness——

So far as he was concerned, that masterly but terrible march down the Bara Valley was over.

CHAPTER VI.

"Dwell not upon thy weariness. Thy strength shall be according to the measure of thy desire."—*Arab Proverb.*

FROM the black heart of darkness, visions emerged; vague, shifting visions; dreams, perhaps. It was impossible to tell. Sensations also emerged; not vague, and very far from pleasant. He was aware of lying on a bed, and of someone taking liberties with his leg; liberties he resented, for they hurt him badly. But when he tried to remonstrate, no words would come. The whole thing felt more like some nightmare of his childhood than like reality. And through it all one conviction persisted, to the point of torture. Something was excruciatingly wrong with that leg. The why and how of it eluded him; and when he tried to remember, the effort hurt so much that he wondered, irritably, was there something wrong with his head too?

Then darkness fell again—timeless darkness.

He was jerked out of it by further unpleasant sensations. No pleasant ones seemed allowed to come his way. This time the bed under him was indulging in private gymnastics. It swung this way and that, jolted him unmercifully, and smelled vilely of canvas. That last enlightened him. It must be a hospital doolie. He was wounded. Dimly he recalled a dark hillside, rain, and rifle shots—

His lucid moment was interrupted by a storm of cheers that beat upon every nerve of his body, and

seemed to him the most senseless sound he had ever heard. His brain was too confused to realise that those cheers were the greeting of the Peshawur column; that Olliver's Division was marching into Maimani, after its last great rearguard fight, in which Finlay and his entire brigade had covered themselves with glory; that his own doolie was in the sorrowful line of wounded, followed by the still more sorrowful line of the dead. As these filed by, the clamour of greeting gave place to a reverent silence; and Vincent relapsed into the dose of semi-consciousness that mercifully blurred his realisation of things.

Later on, there were clearer intervals, when he was gratefully aware of gentle hands that eased him and tended even that troublesome leg of his without giving pain; of cool, refreshing sheets and a pillow against his cheek, luxuries he had not known since leaving Kohat. Once he recognised Desmond's voice telling him they had wired to his mother, and she was starting at once. There were intervals of delirium, too, when the wildest fantasies careered through his brain; when the faces at his bedside expanded to an alarming size, or dwindled foolishly to the size of tennis balls. And there were vivid delusions of Thea's presence: her voice, the touch of her hands, the starry radiance of her eyes. But always when his arms went out to her, they closed on emptiness; and he could hear his own voice, as if it were the voice of another, desperately calling upon her name.

And through it all, in the back of his mind, lurked the haunting fear of something seriously wrong with his leg. In lucid moments, he longed to ask; but could never find courage, lest the answer prove more than he could bear.

Slowly, very slowly, peace blossomed out of pain; and at last came a day when he woke with a clear brain, and a sense of having risen from the grave, to find Sir Theo standing by his bed.

"Good morning, old chap," he said; and the tenderness in his eyes made them look wonderfully like

Thea's own. "I hope you've come to stay. We've had more than enough of the other Vincent's company!" Then, laying a hand on the bandaged head, he stooped and kissed the boy, as he would have kissed his own son in a like case. "Thank God, you've pulled through," he said more gravely.

"Thea?" Vincent whispered, grasping the hand that caressed him. "Has she been here at all?"

"No. She wanted to come. But her mother thought better not. The strain's told on her enough, as it is. But there are these awaiting your pleasure!" He held up three blue envelopes, and Vincent seized them as a starving man seizes bread.

"Where am I—Peshawur?"

"Not yet. We didn't dare move you on. But we shall very shortly. You're in Maimani Field Hospital; and it's after Christmas——"

"O-oh—my ring!"

Desmond smiled. "For Christmas, was it?"

"Christmas Eve," Vincent murmured, quite unable to explain the sacredness of that date.

"Never mind. It'll keep till the New Year You'll come on steadily now."

"I hope so." His brain grew clearer every minute. "What was it, sir?"

"Concussion, fever, touch of pneumonia. You've given us a lively fortnight. Worse than all the Zakkas put together!"

"I'm so sorry." Vincent was gravely penitent. "And you look worn out yourself."

It was true. The long conflict between body and spirit had left its mark on the lean, tanned face; but the spirit was master still.

"Not so bad as all that," Desmond said lightly. "I'm fagged, of course. We all are. I'm only just back from a week of scouring the Bazar Valley. We've re-opened the Khyber at last, thank God; and I'm going to Peshawur for a few days' rest. Shall I take your love along with me, to keep the little girl going while you hurry up and get strong?"

"Yes, please. Tell her—I'll hurry all I can. But my—my leg——"

"Don't worry about your leg," Desmond's tone was almost abrupt. "These little things take time. Your first business is to get well, and worrying won't mend the pace. I'll see you again when I come back."

Vincent did worry, nevertheless. The offending limb was cased in plaster of Paris now, and every attempt to move it was punished with sharp pain. There had been a head wound also, the Nurse explained; but that was going on well. His leg? A compound fracture below the knee, she told him; rather a troublesome business. He must be patient and not talk much yet. Vincent suspected that his last question was responsible for that injunction; and resented it accordingly.

He supposed he might read his letters? And, permission being granted, he spent hours poring over them, everything forgotten but the writer, who also had been treasuring a ring for Christmas Eve. It was a cruel disappointment to have missed spending that day with her. He had set his foolish heart on giving her his token of tokens in the firelight at the very time of their unforgettable talk a year ago. And now—weakened as he was with illness—this unkind delay looked like an ill-omen for the future that still seemed too good to be true. But a merciful languor of mind and body shielded him from too acute anxiety, and a night of sleep, entirely free from fever, wrought wonders.

Next day, too, there were visitors to cheer him: St John, monosyllabic, yet almost tender in his fatherly concern; and Jerry, spruce, tubbed, and shaven, just back from Christmassing at Peshawur. Nothing short of removing his tongue could make Jerry monosyllabic; and, the Colonel being gone, he treated Vincent to a spirited account of their last days in the Bara Valley; illustrated by invisible sketches on the sheet.

"A punishing march we had on the 11th," said he. "For the rain that started the night you were hit

lasted a blessed thirty-six hours. We were 'advance' again; so old Mullen's brigade got all the plums. There was some muddle, I believe. Anyway they had the devil's own time of it. Sort of Tseri Kandáo business. But the men were grand. Thirteenth was our turn for rearguard; and, by way of finale, the Zakkas gave us the biggest show of the campaign. Did their level utmost, they did, to jostle us all into a nullah and wind up with a massacre in style; but our General was one too many for 'em. Transport was all over the shop. Most of it in the river. Sniping galore. Drivers bolting and doolie-bearers chucking down the wounded. *You* were carried by your own Pathans, my good Vinx, and you may thank your stars for the same. But before sunset the General got us all planted on a ridge; and we hung on to that ridge by our back teeth till the Zakkas gave it up in despair. It was great! You should see what the newspaper chaps say of us. 'Mutual confidence,' 'united effort,' 'highest traditions of the Service'—and all that sort of bunkum. Blooming heroes we are, Vinx, your humble visitor included! And now we've rounded things off neatly with Sir Theo's promenade up the Khyber."

"Not to mention Christmas week in Peshawur," Vincent added, with a wistful touch of envy; and a shadow flitted across Jerry's eyes.

"Poor old Vinx!" he said, laying a hand on the other's shoulder. "You did ought to have been there. It was topping. Real beds. Tubs every morning. Five meals a day. Never turned in till 2.30, and altogether we behaved more like lunatics on the loose, than Christian soldiers who'd been upholding traditions a few weeks ago! It only needed you there—and old Howard——"

Vincent sighed. "You saw—Miss Desmond?" he asked.

"Rather! We simply *made* her come to one little dance. But the rest—not she! Didn't feel up to dances, she said. Didn't look up to 'em either. But

now you're mending, and Sir Theo's back, she'll be soon as right as a trivet."

A long letter, that reached Vincent next morning, told him much the same, in politer language. Eden, being in no mood for Christmassing, had gone in to Peshawur on Jerry's return; and Thea's pathetic sketches of the father and his children mercifully distracted Vincent's mind from thoughts of that accursed leg. Neither the Colonel nor Jerry had mentioned it. The subject seemed to be tacitly taboo.

But when at last Desmond reappeared from Peshawur, with the two best doctors in the station, the offending member came in for a fuller share of attention than Vincent quite appreciated. By that time his head was free of bandages and his condition almost normal. There remained only the leg. So they broke the plaster of Paris case. They probed and handled him and asked searching questions; but their faces gave never a sign as to whether his answers were satisfactory or the reverse.

When the ordeal was over, the elder of the two patted Vincent on the shoulder. "You're picking up strength splendidly," he said. "We shall get you into Peshawur to-morrow. Now, Nurse, a little brandy and milk, after all that. Then a few minutes' rest, and the General can have his innings."

It all sounded vaguely reassuring; yet Vincent was far from reassured. The doctors might wear professional masks. But at sight of Sir Theo's face, he would know. He was right. The moment Sir Theo entered the tent—he knew; and Desmond saw the knowledge in his eyes.

"My dearest boy," he began: then, coming quickly forward, he laid a strong enfolding hand on Vincent's, that had gripped the sheet. "*I* was—to tell you——"

Vincent tried to smile. "You have told me," he said. Then his composure deserted him and he covered his eyes to hide the tears that threatened. "Oh God!" he moaned under his breath. "*Not* that! Anything but that!"

Desmond could only tighten his grasp on the clenched hand and sit silent while the boy he loved like a son fought for self-control—and conquered. Then he spoke gravely, tenderly, such consolation as the bitter fact allowed; and Vincent listened without uncovering his eyes.

"All these weeks," he said, "we have been hoping to save it. But the conditions are bad and the alternative too serious to permit any further risks. After all, better lose your leg than—your life."

"Yes—I suppose so." Vincent's tone lacked conviction. For, in those moments of so-called rest, he had decided that, if the leg must go, he must give up Thea, who was more than life to him. But he could not bring himself to speak of her—yet. He could hardly bring himself to speak at all. His heart within him seemed turned to stone and his blood to gall.

"We, who love you, and can't spare you, do more than 'suppose,'" Desmond rebuked him gently. "So will you, when the first shock is past, and you realise how wonderfully such losses are made good nowadays. Dr Cartwright has every hope of saving the knee joint. The importance of that you'll understand later. But he says we must lose no time."

"How soon? When?" Vincent asked, uncovering his eyes.

"Peshawur to-morrow. Thirty-six hours' rest; and then—the sooner the better."

A long pause.

"I suppose this means . . . no more soldiering?"

Again Desmond tightened his clasp. The bitterness of those words none could more keenly understand. "I'm afraid so. But it's much, after all, that you've already proved your quality past question. St John will grieve to lose you, and Finlay has sent in your name for a D.S.O."

A dull flush crept into Vincent's cheeks. "A D.S.O.? Me?"

"Yes, you: for Gulistan, Tseri Kandáo, and your own little affair at Dwatoi."

Vincent sighed. The names sounded like echoes from a former life.

"Think how proud your mother will be," Desmond went on. "To say nothing of Paul. They'll be out early in the New Year."

Vincent flinched. "But this—will spoil it all for her."

"I'm not so sure. I judge her a woman of courage. But remember, much depends how you take it yourself. You're lucky in possessing brains above the average, and you *had* other ambitions, once upon a time. Personally I am convinced that the Political offers the best field for your particular talents. I thought so long ago. But you seemed, then, to need the discipline, the human comradeship. Besides, Thea's heart was set on the Army, and I already suspected why! And it has done great things for you, Vincent, in a very short time."

Vincent nodded. Better than any one else he knew that. "But the other will suit you down to the ground. Lucky I'm in a position to square it, with my friend Sir Eldred Lenox at the Simla Foreign Office. And Thea——"

That second mention of her name gave Vincent courage to plunge. "You—you say her heart was set on the Army, sir; and—it's true. I've always felt that . . . my great good luck came from sticking to it. God knows, I'm unworthy of her, at best; but now . . . oh, . . . it's impossible——"

At that Desmond's tired eyes flashed suddenly to life.

"Vincent! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"No, sir," Vincent answered strangely unmoved. "I never felt more painfully in possession of them. I know—it will make her unhappy, for a time. But—in the end——"

"Great heavens, boy! Who's going to deal her this cruel blow? *I'm* not. And I'll be no party to it either." Pushing back his chair, he rose and stood there looking handsomer, more commanding,

in his anger, than Vincent had seen him yet. For the moment he forgot he was speaking to an invalid. "The Army, indeed! If you'd seen the poor child's face all these weeks, you'd be ashamed to talk such stuff. For myself, I've a higher opinion of her Mother's daughter than to suppose a leg more or less is going to affect the state of her heart. And if *you* can think it, Vincent, then you *are* unworthy of her, out and out."

At that, Vincent winced so visibly that the older man pulled himself up with a jerk. He had half feared that the shock might produce a recrudescence of the earlier Vincent, the slightly morbid self-depreciation that had vanished of late. But he had not bargained for this: and fresh from Thea's brave, appealing face, it was more than he could stand.

"I'd no business to let fly at you, in your present state," he said in a changed tone. "But you startled me. And any one who hurts my Thea must expect small mercy at my hands. If you've got this maggot in your brain, you must tackle things without any help from me. All I insist on is that she shall be allowed some voice in the matter."

"I—I'll write to her, sir," was all Vincent could find to say. The unexpected storm had overwhelmed him; but it did not seem to have swept the maggot from his brain; and the old hesitation, so long unheard, gave Desmond a fresh jar. Had illness clean wiped out the soldierly Vincent of Dwatoi?

"Oh—you'll write to her?" he repeated with so straight a look that Vincent could not meet it. "I wonder very much what you'll find to say to her. Meantime—*I* shall give her your love, and tell her she shall see you as soon after the operation as we are allowed to transfer you to the Ollivers' bungalow. That was my arrangement. Have you any objection?"

Vincent hesitated. "I—I only—it might be less hard—for us both, if——"

He broke off, and the faint tremor of his lip ex-

tinguished the last spark of anger in Desmond's heart.

"My dear old man," he said, gripping Vincent's shoulder. "I tell you frankly I want it to be so hard that it will be impossible. As it is, I'm making big allowances for your late illness. And if I've seemed a bit harsh it's only because I see you're slipping into a morbid view of the whole thing. I'm the last man on earth to minimise your loss; but when fate flings a knife at you, there are always two ways of catching it—by the handle or the blade. You seem death on the blade this morning. I've been trying to commend the handle to your attention. That's all. Now I *must* go. I've a hundred things to see to. I'll be with you the day of the operation; and just try to thank God you'll soon be rid of a horrid encumbrance that nearly knocked you out altogether."

But Vincent had a long way to go before he could arrive at thanking the God who was presumably responsible for this ironic stroke, which banished him from the Army at the very moment when all his old crippling indecisions had given place to quietness and confidence and boundless hope; when he felt increasingly glad and proud of his fellowship with the great Service which he had once presumed to regard as a prescription for his own private malady. Through months of effort, fitful yet persistent, through endless minor miseries, and at last through the supreme test of war, he had succeeded in finding not merely himself, but another, worth ten thousand of himself—to this end!

The irony of it crushed him to earth and temporarily distorted his vision of things. Desmond's fear had not been unfounded. There was real danger, in this black moment, of a revival of the earlier Vincent, with disastrous result. He had been neither man nor lover, had Desmond's straight speaking failed to move him, and that deeply: yet had it entirely failed to shake his obstinate conviction that, as a disabled man, unfit

for the Service, he was, by the same token, an unfit husband for his soldier-hearted Thea. Even at this stage, he was still unable to believe that her feeling for him could come within a hundred miles of his own exalted passion for her.

It would half kill him to write that letter: and, in his blindness and bitterness of heart, it did not once occur to him that it might half kill her to receive it. For the moment, the ascetic strain in him rose up and took command of things: and when a man of that temper believes he is doing right, there is no more unreasonable being on this earth.

When his Nurse had left him for the night and believed him sleeping, he wrote that letter by the light of his lantern: wrote and sealed it: for he lacked courage to read it through.

The journey to Peshawur, next day, was accomplished without relapse or over-fatigue. Thanks to a strong constitution, and the toughening effect of the campaign, Vincent had regained his strength with a rapidity that astonished the doctors and delighted Desmond, who refused to believe that the boy's mad impulse would materialise when it came to the point. In his righteous wrath, he forgot how near he had once come to sacrificing Honor and himself through just such an exaggerated sense of unworthiness. The fact that he half understood the boy's feeling served rather to increase his firm determination that, by some means, Vincent must be saved from himself. Personally, he did not believe that unspeakable letter would ever be written.

As a matter of fact, it was despatched on the evening that Vincent reached Peshawur.

CHAPTER VII.

"How shall I thrust thee apart,
Since all my growth tends to thee night and day?
Swift are the currents setting all one way;
They draw my life, my life out of my heart."
—ALICE MEYNELL.

DESMOND'S stormy interview with Vincent, and his lurking fear of the boy's next move, did not lighten the task of breaking the doctor's verdict to Thea. Too well he knew how keenly she would feel the loss for him, and how bitter would be her own disappointment about the Army. She had borne the long separation and the strain with a beautiful fortitude, as testified by her mother and Frank, two of the bravest women he knew: and it hurt him unspeakably to lay a fresh burden on her young shoulders.

But, in his masculine phrase, she 'took it standing.' The faint tremor of her lip was resolutely stilled, and she succeeded in blinking back her tears.

"My poor, *poor* darling!" was all she said. "And I—I encouraged him over the soldiering. If it hadn't been for me——"

"If it hadn't been for you, my Thea," her father interposed quietly, drawing her to him, "he would never have become the man that this campaign has made him. Army or no Army, you have brought out all the latent soldier stuff in him that was the great need of his character: stuff that will be of superlative value whatever his future work may be. Meantime—

of course this business has rather bowled him over. But he's stood the journey splendidly, and there's no reason why he shouldn't stand—the other, equally well."

Thea drew in her lips. "When?" she asked.

"The day after to-morrow. He is to have complete rest till then."

"Not even a letter, Dads?"

"Certainly a letter, darling." The fervour of his kiss astonished her. She had not the key to it.

For an instant she clung to him in silence, then: "I'll write to-night," she said, "and send it to-morrow."

Not a word of her own regret: and from her silence he judged it keener than he had feared. Since the ordeal of Phyllis's death, she had grown more reserved even with him.

That night she sat up late pouring out her heart to her dear and unseen lover; unseen now for nearly three months. Only one corner of it she cloaked from him, as from her father, who was right in fearing that her grief on the score of the Army went too deep for words. And next morning, on coming in to breakfast, there lay a letter by her plate: a letter that Desmond had been glancing at anxiously in the intervals of talking to his wife and Frank. He saw Thea pocket her treasure and slip away with it to her room. Then he retired to Olliver's *dufter*, nominally, to deal with his *dák;* actually, to eat his heart out with wondering what Vincent had said to his Twin.

After ten minutes of purgatory, he gave it up and went straight to her room. Outside the door he paused, reluctant to intrude, till the silence within was broken by a muffled sound twice repeated. That dispelled hesitation; and, quietly lifting the latch, he went in.

Thea lay prone in a chair by the fire, her face buried in the cushion, her shoulders shaken with repressed sobs. Had Vincent been present at that moment, Desmond would have felt like knocking him down.

Thea had recognised his step; but she made no move as he came quickly forward and laid a hand upon her hair.

"My blessing, what *has* he said to you?" The direct question came out involuntarily.

For answer, she thrust a crumpled sheet towards him without uncovering her face. "Read it—read it," she repeated. "I think—he's gone off his head."

"Remember he's been very ill, darling, and he's had a great shock," Desmond said, stroking her hair.

Then he straightened the offending letter, and read:

"Thea—my Beloved, your father will have told you that the Zakkas have left their mark on me for life. My leg must go. And that means an end of soldiering, just when I felt so proud and glad of the choice I had made, thanks to my dear stepfather—and you. Well, it's useless whining. I must set my teeth and bear it; and I could, in time, if it didn't also mean losing *you*.

"Of course I know what your answer to that will be. But you're a born soldier's wife, my Thea, and a man with half a leg lopped off is no fit husband for you. It's a bitter business having to write like this. But something stronger than myself makes me feel it is the only right course for me, and best—in the end, for you. So you must give yourself time, darling, to get over it; just as I must somehow steel myself against your natural impulse of generosity and womanly pity. Your father doesn't see things as I do. He was very angry with me. He insists I shall come to the bungalow when I'm well over this horrid operation; and I will—*if you wish it*. I'm afraid it will only make things harder; but I haven't the strength of mind to refuse the chance of seeing you once again. Try—try to see it all uncoloured by generosity and pity, if that's possible to one of your nature.

"I can't write more. I feel half crazy. My head's all to pieces with thinking things out; and my heart—but that's quite out of court. Thea, don't hate me or utterly misunderstand me. Though I don't

altogether understand myself yet, or anything else except the one brutal fact. Whether you are mine or not, I shall worship you always.—VINCENT."

Desmond's long mouth hardened as he read. "Upon my soul, I can't forgive the boy," he broke out hotly. "*This*, on the top of all you've stood up to so pluckily! He deserves a good shaking. I gave him one, metaphorically, the other day; and hoped I'd shaken this nonsense out of him." His attention was arrested afresh by those last pitiful sentences, through which the heartbreak showed so plainly; and again he caressed the bright, bowed head. "After all, child," he said, "the poor fellow's probably dying to be convinced that he's making a fool of himself."

She sat up now. "Do you think so, really?" she asked, brushing aside her tears with a gesture of weariness infinitely pathetic in one so full of life and hope. "*I* simply don't know what to think. There's an odd streak in him that I don't yet understand; and when he talks raving idiotcy about generosity and pity, what on earth *can* one do?—I can't order him to marry me!"

Desmond's grave face lightened. The thing must not be allowed to assume the proportions of tragedy; or, between Thea's pride and Vincent's queer streak, there would be the devil to pay.

"I'm not so sure of that, little girl. Shall we threaten to sue him for breach of promise? It might bring him to his senses!"

At that Thea laughed till tears interrupted her, and there was danger of laughing and crying together: seeing which, Desmond took her by the arms and drew her up out of the chair.

"My Twin isn't going to pieces over this little contretemps," he said quietly; "I came in here just to prevent any such thing. Let's get into position and consider our next move."

Getting into position was her old childish phrase for the one attitude in which she felt perfectly sure of having her way with him.

"Sit, then," she said, smiling through her tears. He obeyed; and she sat also, resting her head against his. "Seriously, Father darling, in the face of that crazy letter, what *are* we going to do?"

That "we" delighted him. It was another remnant of Twin days, when the first person singular was impermissible between them. As Desmond was silent a moment, pondering her problem, she added: "Have you told Mother?"

"No. She was inclined from the first to be critical of Vincent. So I kept my counsel, hoping that nothing would come of it. And I'm hoping so still."

"You wise and precious Dads!" She lightly kissed his temple. "Now we must invent some way for a poor discarded Thea to assert herself without serious injury to pride."

Desmond gathered her close. "Well, honestly," he said, "I believe the wisest plan will be to leave him severely alone till we can get him over here. Then, if a sight of you doesn't finish him—you're no woman and he's no man; in which case I'm mightily deceived in you both!"

"Not even answer—this?" She touched the letter lying on her knee.

"No. Meanwhile, I shall see him to-morrow morning, and I can tell him that you don't agree with him any more than I do; but you feel his letter makes writing impossible, and you'd rather leave things in abeyance till he is well enough to be moved over here. Will that do?"

"Y-yes. Say it kindly, darling." Fresh tears lurked in her voice.

"I couldn't say it otherwise," he answered, kissing her. "I love the boy."

"Mayn't he have the letter I wrote last night?"

"By all means. It may do him good to see just how you took things before he tried to upset the boat. He'll suffer, poor fellow. And it'll be hard on you—which is worse."

"No!" she broke in vehemently.

"Yes!" he countered with equal decision. "But I'm spending this week in Peshawur, and I shall devote as much of it to my Twin as obdurate Zakkas will allow."

"Still obdurate? After all your thrashings?"

"Lord, yes. They take a lot of beating, those scoundrels. That's what I like about 'em. Besides—though we scoured all their valleys and left big black smudges behind, our exit down the Bara Valley couldn't exactly be called a triumphal progress."

"But it was splendid. You *know* it was!"

He had successfully diverted her interest now.

"The men and officers were splendid, right enough. And the thing was something of an achievement; but it had the unavoidable air of a retreat, which rather spoilt the effect. So the Zakkas and the Akas, and a few other clans, are still hanging on to their rifles, which means I shan't get home so soon as I imagined. I don't go till I've seen this thing through."

She pressed her fingers into the hollow of his cheek. "As they couldn't kill you with bullets, don't let them kill you with worry instead."

"No fear. Trust Mother for that!—But now, little girl, I *must* go and tackle my *dák* in earnest."

He rose and set her on her feet. "No more tears. That's part of the prescription! I'll send an orderly round with your letter and——" his face lit up. "Thea, I've got a notion—a fine one. I'll make you my unofficial, unauthorised, extra private secretary, for this occasion only! It must be a dead secret between you and me; and it'll help to keep your mind occupied. What d'you say to that?"

"I say—you're the grandest thing, in fathers, that was ever invented!"

He laughed and kissed her. "Come along, then, when you've removed all traces of the storm."

And so he left her—as he always did in the hour of trouble—comforted, strengthened, and, in this case,

firmly convinced that his stern prescription must prove infallible, simply because it had been prescribed by him.

Desmond, himself, had need of all his own resolution when the moment came for administering that same prescription to the boy, who lay awaiting his ordeal with a mask of control upon his face that added years to his age. Yet, had Desmond known, it was not dread of the coming operation which Vincent combated. That very human shrinking had been eclipsed by the anguish of all it involved. Thea's refusal to accept his renunciation was only what he had expected of her. He had hoped for another letter: but he received her message with no betrayal of feeling beyond a pained compression of his lips.

"Thank you, sir," he said quietly. "She — she's splendid. I know that."

For a moment they confronted one another in silence, those two men who loved her, each in his own fashion, better than anything on earth. Then said Desmond, with equal quietness—"I'm doubtful whether even you know, yet, just how splendid she is. But you're going to discover it when this unpleasant business is over. Things will look different then: you'll see. Meantime, you've done wonders in the way of recovery. And you're coming through the rest all right: no fear."

Vincent sighed. "Oh yes, I shall come through, just because I . . . I wouldn't mind . . ."

"You *would* mind," Desmond flashed out half angrily. "Don't perjure yourself, boy, because you're in a black mood. Besides—have you *no* consideration for her?"

That last roused Vincent like the flick of a whip. "Forgive me, sir," he said, and held out his hand. "You're far too kind and too patient with me—both of you."

"I admit you've taxed *my* patience almost to the limit, Vincent," Desmond answered frankly; but he

grasped that proffered hand and held it while he spoke. "There's only one thing for which I won't forgive you. And I think you know what that is.—God bless you."

And so they parted: Desmond firmly convinced that every ounce of his hard prescription would be needed to bring that strange boy thoroughly to his senses, and prevent him from breaking Thea's heart because a Zakka Khel bullet had broken his leg.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Thou art my love, my life, my heart,
The very eyes of me:
And hast command of every part
To live and die for thee!"
—HERRICK.

It was all over. The knee joint had been saved. The doctors were as pleased with themselves as with their patient's quiet pluck and swift recuperative power. He would be himself again in no time they told Sir Theo, who passed on the news to his unauthorised private secretary; adding, with grave emphasis: "*Himself*, I hope, in every sense of the word."

In her heart, also, that hope gleamed fitfully, now bright, now dim, like a star on a night of cloud. And despite keen interest in the work she shared, it seemed something more than no time before the actual day of his coming dawned at last.

The moment breakfast was over she fled to her room, there to remain till her father brought word that Vincent was in the study ready to see her. Bravely though she had endured the weeks of waiting, that last hour was worse than all. While this critical event still hovered afar off, it had been comparatively easy to cherish the conviction that once she could see and speak to him all would be well. But now that the seeing and the speaking were imminent, sudden fear assailed her: fear of his shyness,—almost forgotten in three months of letters: fear of his pride, sensitiveness, and quiet obstinacy, that made him so difficult to deal with, in certain moods. And more than all she feared

his disconcerting trick of silence, that would surely paralyse her own tongue as it had done on more than one occasion. In all their imaginary interviews, he had surrendered at sight of her; now her quaking heart felt convinced he would do no such thing. And in that case—what kindling words had she at command to make him believe that pity and generosity simply had no say in the matter?

If she could only show him her heart! But, in these imperfect human conditions, the heart must by some means be rendered into words: and now that her hour had come, all her carefully collected reasons and arguments deserted her. She could think of nothing more effectual than to fling herself into his arms.

At the sound of Desmond's footstep, she sprang out of her chair and stood with clenched hands, trying to control her quickened breathing.

Thus he found her; and coming quickly forward, took those small, determined hands in both his own. "Vincent is in the study, waiting for you, my darling," he said; and she closed her eyes a moment, trying to take it in.

"Dads—what does he seem like?" she asked under her breath.

"He's very strung up, poor fellow, and consequently very silent. I couldn't speak much myself. There's nothing more to be said; except the things that only you can say."

She drew in a breath that was half a sob. "I wish I knew *what* things. I'm so afraid I shall simply cry or—do something idiotic."

He put a steadying arm round her. "Not a bit of it," he said with deliberate lightness. "You're just going to act as charmingly as you know how! Be brave enough to pocket your own fears and treat his in a vein of tender comedy. Then you'll make him feel a fool for having harboured them, and the thing will be done. No admittance, mind, for pity or tragedy. He's simply lost his sense of proportion; consequently, his sense of humour. And it's your business to restore

both. Ten to one, as I said, the poor boy is dying to be convinced of his own folly: and you must know by this time—or you ought to!—that the strongest and best of us are wax in the right woman's hands.—There! Have I done any good? What a helpless pair you are!"

"Done any good!" Her face was alight all over. "Dads, you're a miracle! I was feeling an utter coward before you came. And now—I'm to act, am I? Very well. I'll act splendidly!" She lifted her head and stood a moment considering the new aspect of things. Then: "I've got an inspiration!" she cried; and darting away from him, opened a drawer full of Vincent's letters. One of these she picked out and slipped into her blouse.

"Now I'm ready," she said; and linking an arm through his, went with him to the study door.

There she paused, and looked up into his eyes. "You *do* believe it will be all right?" she whispered.

"Of course it will," he answered, kissing her. "Now—go in and win!"

Very softly she lifted the latch and went forward a few steps: then stopped dead.

There was to be no admittance for tragedy; but her heart failed her at sight of the crutches leaning against his chair. It hurt her, almost physically, to know that he could not come to her and take her in his arms. So often, in desolate moods, she had pictured the rapture of this moment; that—just for a breathing space—the bewildering reality seemed more than she could bear.

But his first movement banished all thought of herself. She had come resolved to play a part, bravely and lightly: for she must play to win. She saw him put out his hands, then draw them back and grip the arms of his chair. And for a moment she stood confronting him, forcing herself to smile, though tears dimmed her vision of his face.

"Well?" she asked in her softest voice. "Aren't you rather ashamed of yourself?"

"Ashamed——?" he echoed blankly. He had been prepared for the ordeal of tears and tenderness, for anything but this.

"Yes—ashamed," she repeated, keeping her eyes on his. "For daring to insult me with that unspeakable letter. I can only imagine that you wrote it in a fit of aberration. And if you don't confess that you did—I—I'll never believe in you again!"

There was an interminable moment of strained silence.

"And if I'm obliged to confess—that I did not——" he said at last, steadying his voice with an effort. "I forfeit—everything?"

She shook her head, still smiling. "I suppose that's what you *want* me to say! But if it isn't true, I can't say it—can I?—even to please you?"

A man who hears his death sentence reprieved might feel as Vincent felt then. But this was the very tenderness against which he must steel himself.

"Thea, Thea!" he cried desperately, "you don't realise—things yet. You—a soldier at heart; and I—look at me! For weeks I'll be dragging about on crutches——" A movement sent them rattling to the ground. "A pretty figure of a lover!"

"But there'll be plenty of other weeks beyond those weeks," she reminded him meekly. "And what matter the crutches, when there's you in between them? I think—darling, your brain's got muddled through illness. That's why you're putting the cart before the horse. It's you that's the horse and the crutches are the cart; though it's they that drag—oh dear, I seem to be getting rather mixed!" Her brave laugh had a tear in it. But she hurried on. For Vincent's eyes never left her face, and she could feel herself gaining ground.

"Oh, don't you *see?* Hearts can't be argued about. They have to be believed. How *can* you, after my letter, still think all that crazy nonsense about womanly pity . . . ?"

"Nonsense?"

"Well—that's putting it very mildly; but I haven't the heart to call you names! Besides—look here!" She drew out the letter that was her trump card. "You won't go back on your own handwriting will you?"

This time she moved nearer, holding the sheet towards him, and he read with a pang of memory the words written in an impulse of exultation at Dwatoi: "To Althea—'who may command him anything.'"

"Vincent—is that true?" she asked; and her heart beat in hammer strokes at sight of his confusion.

"Yes. I mean . . . of course . . . it *was*——" he stammered hopelessly. "Things were different, then. That night I felt—I could achieve. . . . Oh Thea, beloved——"

His voice broke on the word. For she had flown to him, with a crooning sound, and was on her knees beside his chair, her lips pressed upon his hand.

"Darling—don't. You mustn't," he rebuked her unsteadily, while his other hand caressed her hair. "It's the wrong way round, altogether. Do get up—please."

Her head moved in a decided negative. "Not until you say it *is* true—now; this minute."

"God knows it is—now and always," he said; and the vibration in his voice carried her back to Gulistan. Then she knew that all the sham defences he had builded against her were down at last: and lifting her head she looked straight into his eyes, though her own were swimming in tears.

"Very well, then," she said, "I command you—to marry me. Is *that* plain enough English for you, Mr Vincent Leigh?"

It took him a few seconds to realise that the nightmare of his own creation was over. "But, Thea——" he began.

"Don't argue. It's your punishment! You've brought it on yourself——"

And before she could say any more she was in his arms.

For an age, that might have been five minutes or half an hour, they clung together, as if neither could bear to lose hold of the other: and the months between became as a watch in the night.

At last Vincent put her a little away, that he might feast his eyes on her face.

"You angelic Thea, you said once that fits of generosity were very dangerous things and—a family failing."

"Did I? How clever of me! Fancy your remembering!"

She was innocence itself; and he gave her a gentle shake. "You know what I mean. Are you quite, *quite* sure you're not chiefly—sorry for me?"

Up went her chin.

"More insults—after all that! Dearest and craziest, I'm not sorry for you. Not one crumb! It's a horrid inconvenience; at least that's all it will be in a few months' time. And as for me"—she framed his face with her hands—"so long as I have *you*, I don't care how many legs you've got! Though merely as a matter of taste, I'd prefer one to half a dozen! There's more plain English for you. I'm chock-full of plain English this morning!"

He laughed and caught her to him again. "Thank God I've got two arms to hold you with," he said. "But I'm not only thinking of—this inconvenience. It's having to leave—the Army."

It was out at last, the word they both dreaded: and she winced inwardly. But though his eyes searched her face, he could detect nothing beyond a faint deepening of her colour.

"Vincent, darling, that's a real big blow—for us both," she admitted honestly, without attempting to avoid his gaze. "But we're not going to let it spoil—things that are bigger still. Besides, you *are* a soldier now. You've proved it, even to your Thea's satisfaction. And there'll be letters after your name to prove it always, whatever other work you do. You've still the chance of a fine career before you and a

charming wife into the bargain! Oh no! We *can't* be sorry for ourselves. I can't be: and I'm not going to let you!" Then, leaning closer, she added under her breath: "Father said something once about a ring. Is it there still? Or—have you thrown it down a drain?"

"It's there still," he answered, tightening his hold.

"Since when has it been there?"

"Since Maidan. I carried it always in my breast pocket, for a talisman."

"Is it in your pocket—now?"

"I believe so!"

"May I make sure?" Already her fingers had stolen shyly under his coat. "Nothing but letters," she murmured, feeling down into the depths.

"Letters from my living talisman, who has twice saved me from myself," he said. But her fingers had closed on the little case and she could think of nothing else.

It was open now; and there, in its white velvet nest, gleamed an oval sapphire circled with brilliants. "Oh—oh!" she breathed ecstatically. "Like mother's big square one, that I've always envied and envied. Now—put it on, please. Then I'll really feel safe at last! I wouldn't give you back that ring, even if you became as unspeakable as the Beast in the fairy tale!"

Without a word, and without any of his old hesitancy, Vincent slipped it on to her finger; and capturing her hand pressed it to his lips. "Not only my hand," Thea whispered, and slid her arms round his neck——

A footstep outside recalled her to earth and the memory of her father, who had been waiting—how long? She had quite lost count of time.

Reluctantly she drew away from Vincent's arms. "There's the beloved Dad—longing to know. May I call him?"

She did so, without waiting for permission; and

when he entered she was on her feet, by the chair, one arm round Vincent's shoulders, her face radiant as an unclouded day of summer.

"Darling, it *was* a shame to keep you waiting," she said, "when it's all—thanks to you. I've commanded him to marry me. And he's graciously consented to obey! Look." She flung out her glorified left hand. "There's the sign and seal of his obedience!"

For Desmond, it was the insignia of the Other Man, dreaded ever since her arrival in India; yet was it, none the less, the most welcome sight on earth. Since Gulistan days, jealousy had been wrestled with and overthrown. And, like all who conquer jealousy, he had his reward in the knowledge that neither lover nor husband, nor any right and natural human tie, would ever rob him of his great-hearted little girl.

CHAPTER IX.

"The idealist . . . is actually a power in the physical world; far more so than the proverb-makers and platitude-mongers believe."—E. SIDGWICK.

IN Peshawur, April is the month of months for beauty: roses everywhere, and of other flowers no stint: trees along the Mall flaunting their new leaves, and every patch of meadowland emerald-bright with young corn. Though the midday sun already contains more than a threat of the furnace to come, the cool of the evening —in well-watered and well-tended gardens—makes divine amends; and in all Peshawur there were few gardens better tended or better loved than Frank Olliver's.

On this particular evening of April, its dim green spaces were bright with ramblers and fragrant with bush roses massed at the far end of the lawn. Tents here and there under the trees suggested a house full to overflowing; a chronic condition with Frank, who detested entertaining, but loved having her friends to stay: and down the long lawn, in the last of the daylight, Vincent was strolling on his mother's arm.

Except for the indispensable walking-stick and the deliberate lift of his injured leg, no casual observer would have suspected the truth: and in time, through the anodyne of use and wont, Vincent himself would come to think no more of that alien member than of the hat upon his head. But the first two months of

association with it had been something of an ordeal: and he was still rather morbidly sensitive on the subject; quite ungrateful, Thea declared, to the contrivance that had set him on his feet, and made him, except for military purposes, almost as other men. Strictly between themselves, they alluded to it as 'The Inconvenience'; till Thea objected that it was unfair to call it names, when it was doing such distinguished service. And it became the D.S.O. from that day forward.

She was indoors now, drowned fathoms deep in boxes and dressing-bags and rolls. For Desmond's long-deferred leave had materialised at last; and they were all packing — Desmonds, Wyndhams, Ollivers, and Eden babies. This was their last evening in India for many months to come; and Thea had promised Vincent an hour in the moonlight after dinner, when the worst would be over.

Meanwhile, he strolled with his mother, to whom he had drawn consciously nearer in the past three months than in all the twenty-two years of boyhood and youth. Since last they so walked in their garden above the sea, they had both become lovers; and love, that had unlocked their hearts, had also, in a measure, unlocked their lips. Reserved and slow of self-expression they would always be; but they were no longer prisoners in the fortress of the spirit: and each had more keenly realised that freedom through beholding it in the other's eyes.

For Vincent, their reunion in such altered conditions seemed a fitting crown to all that had gone before. It had kindled to a livelier glow the deep inexpressible love that had upheld him through years of loneliness. It had brought home to him the knowledge that the mother who had always been a little afraid for him was afraid no longer, but filled with a quiet confidence and pride, such as she, of all others, could most perfectly convey to him without the mutual embarrassment of speech. In the black moods, that would still visit him till he was inured to his defect, he had rested in her

silence as a tired traveller rests in the shade of trees; while Thea rode and flirted unblushingly with her 'very firstest love,' Uncle Paul.

But to-night there was no black mood. Not even the 'Inconvenience' could cast a shadow upon his clear horizon. Had it not secured him six months' leave? And had not Sir Theo promised, only yesterday, to make such arrangements for his future as would enable Thea to return with him as his wife?

He was speaking of it now, as he paced the lawn with his mother.

"And you have to know Sir Theo very intimately," he added, "to understand what a big concession that is from him. For he and Lady Desmond won't be out again till this time next year. It's splendid that he'll really come back as Commander-in-Chief. I only hope his health won't go to pieces after this long strain." He paused. "We had a great talk last night. I don't know what spell he uses, but he seems to draw me out as no one else can; hardly even—Thea. Mother, I can't begin to tell you all he's done for your very unsatisfactory son."

She pressed the hand that held her arm. "I can see a good deal without telling; but I can't see the unsatisfactoriness any more!"

They walked on for a time in silence; then she turned to him with a light in her face, that looked years younger than on the day they parted.

"Vincent," she said, "have you realised the date? It's just two years ago to-day that my Paul walked into our cottage, out of the blue. And from that mustard-seed of an event look what flowering tree of happiness has sprung up for us both! Chance? I don't believe in it. '*Les rencontres ici-bas sont souvent préparés de loin.*'"

Vincent nodded. "That's nearer the mark. Look at Sir Thakur Das. Mother, I wish you could meet him. He writes of coming home this summer. If so, we'll get him down to the cottage—and draw him out. Talking of cottages, Thea and I built an

air-castle yesterday. We're to spend our first leave looking for my dream-chalet in Kashmir. If we can't find it we'll build it! All my tons of books are to be stored there. It's to be our private sanctuary, when we want to get away from things—and breathe freely. Ah, here she comes!"

They were nearing the house now; and as he spoke, Thea darted into the verandah waving a small object in her hand. Too impatient to go round by the steps, she took a flying leap on to the path and fairly ran into Vincent's arms.

"The mail's just in—and I've got my Royal Red Cross!" she cried, lifting her face for the kiss of congratulation to each in turn. "Now, Mr Vinx, I'm even with you! Isn't it lovely? Father says I'm to wear it for dinner." She pulled gently at his walking-stick. "Let *me* take its place," she said. "Just time for one more turn. Then I must hurry up and dress."

"As I prefer not to hurry, I'll go in now," Mrs Wyndham said, patting her son's arm. And leaving them together, she went on to the house in search of her man.

She found him in the *dufter*, talking to Honor, while Desmond sat at a big littered table sweeping up the pieces of his great campaign. Though nominally it had ended in December, the most harassing part of it—that had strained Desmond's patience, resource, and strength almost to breaking-point—had dragged on well into the New Year. Not until the 2nd of April had the last toll of fines and rifles been paid in full; and these, it need hardly be said, came from the Zakka Khels, whose rifles were dearer to them than the blood in their veins.

Throughout those three months, Sir Theo Desmond had laboured, with untiring patience, firmness, and judgment, to convince some half a dozen obstinate clans that the sooner they confessed their sins and paid up their just fines, the better it would be for themselves and their precious crops. These he threatened

with wholesale destruction in the spring; clinching his threat by a promise that this time their country would be occupied for six months at least. They knew him for a man of his word; patient in controversy, yet unflinching in punishment and of unswerving straightness, whether in action or speech; and no doubt but they respected him most for the very virtues least known among themselves.

Finally, his patience exhausted, he had dismissed their futile *jirgahs*, bidding them, in plain terms, choose between peace and war: and, this time, they had chosen peace. It had taken six weeks to collect the six hundred rifles demanded of them. But they were all in now. The final *jirgahs* had been interviewed, the final despatches written. Staffs and brigades were being rapidly dispersed; and to-morrow morning the mail train would bear Sir Theo to Bombay, *en route* for England and his children, and a year of well-earned rest.

That night he sat late at his table, sorting and arranging his private papers. There, Honor found him — the rest being gone — and stood watching his deft manipulations, one arm laid round his shoulders.

"Well done, my man," she said softly, when the last drawer was emptied and the table clear. "You've linked your name, for always, with an achievement big enough to satisfy even your ambitious soul."

"Remains to be seen," he answered, smiling, and turning his key in the lock. "Its value depends on results. We didn't hit hard enough in the Tirah, for my taste. The scoundrels wouldn't give us half a chance. But now—well, I think I've made some impression on them, for the moment. Lord! They're exhausting folk to tackle."

"Well, you've done it magnificently, Theo," she insisted, pressing his shoulder. "But I believe another month would have killed you."

"Not a bit of it. Like them, I take a lot of killing! All the same, these last few months might very well have bowled me over, if *you* hadn't been at my

elbow, thinking for me and oiling the wheels, as no one else can."

"That's *my* share in the achievement!" she said; and stooping, kissed the silvered hair on his temples. "And I'm proud of it. But now, no more talking. We've a short night as it is. And to-morrow——"

"Ah, yes—to-morrow!" He pushed back his chair and stretched extensively. "No matter how keen I am for Home, it's always a wrench when it comes to leaving the Border. But I admit I've had my fill, these six months, of the Afridi in all his manifestations. And I'm not sorry to have seen the last of 'em—for the time being."

But although they were to leave Peshawur by an early train, he had not seen or heard the last of them—yet.

Next morning, while the travellers were breakfasting, and two landaus stood without awaiting them, there arose in the compound a sudden wild uproar that startled even Desmond and Olliver, hardened though they were to the music of Afridi lungs.

Desmond sprang to his feet. "What the devil's up now?" he said, and hurried into the verandah, closely followed by Olliver, Vincent, and the two Pauls.

There, an amazing sight confronted them. Frank's ordered garden was thronged to overflowing with unbidden guests; the strangest that any General Commanding had ever entertained unawares. The place was a seething mass of peaked turbans and wild-looking figures, in chogas or dust-coloured rags. Men of every Afridi and Orakzai clan were there: Rabbia, Malikdin, and Aka Khels; Afridis from the Khyber and Jamrud; and, conspicuously to the fore, the tough, wiry little *Z*akkas of the Bara Valley and Tirah. Hearing of Desmond's imminent departure, these, his recent enemies, had invaded that astonished cantonment, to make their farewell salaam and express their admiration for the man who had fought

them unflinchingly, and fined them unflinchingly; yet had treated them always with scrupulous justice and had never gone back on his word.

The moment he appeared in the verandah there were shouts of "Generailly Sahib!" "Desmin Sahib Bahadur!" And the cheering broke out again with such vigour that, for a time, he could only acknowledge, mutely, a unique tribute that stirred him as he had not been so stirred since the day he left his regiment to command the Frontier Force. Paul Wyndham, standing at his elbow, felt almost like blessing the ill news that had enabled him to share this great moment with his friend.

"Theo, this is something *like* a victory. There must be five hundred of them, at least," he said; and Desmond nodded.

"Amazing fellows, they are!"

Then, as the clamour subsided, certain headmen of those amazing fellows came forward to speak for the rest; and while they spoke, women and children appeared in the background, eager to know what it was all about. Honor had guessed already; and Thea, glancing up at the beautiful, controlled face, saw the gleam of tears in her mother's eyes. Her own attention was somewhat distracted by Phil, who clung shivering to her hand. For him, those yells and that excited crowd too vividly recalled Gulistan. It took a little time to reassure him and to explain that these were 'tame Afridis,' who had only come to tell the General Sahib what a splendid fellow he was.

"Thea, they're saying they'll never fight us again," Vincent struck in, translating for her benefit the talk at the verandah's edge. "That our enemies will always be their enemies, whoever they may be! And now they want to carry Sir Theo to the station on their shoulders!"

At that Phil's terror was dissolved in delight. "Oh, *do* let them—do!" he cried.

But such a proceeding being manifestly impossible, the Afridis were now begging leave to unharness his

horses and draw the General Sahib to the edge of the carpet with their own hands. It needed all Desmond's tact and courtesy to explain that he could not allow his very good friends to do the work of horses. But since they desired to honour him with an Afridi escort, he would bid his coachman drive slowly; and to the two chief headmen of the jirgahs he offered the two available box-seats.

Fresh cheers greeted this proposal; and in that amazing fashion they set out at last: Honor and Desmond in the first landau, with their two children and Eden's, that were henceforth to be as their own. Phil sat between the lovers, so far as excitement would allow him to sit at all; and Thea, using him for a shield, managed to secure Vincent's hand, which she squeezed spasmodically at intervals.

But her eyes were all for her father, who seemed to have shed his weariness like a garment. Leaning half out of the carriage, he greeted, by name, every man he recognised in that vociferous crowd, and exchanged sallies with those nearest to him, who were quite capable of giving as good as they received. For Pathan and Afghan humour comes nearer to the British variety than does that of any race in India.

The crowd that followed along with them drew others in its wake; and when they approached the station there was the guard of honour drawn up outside; men of Sir Theo's old regiment among them; and to the general clamour was added the heart-stirring music of bands. The platform was thronged with officers in khaki, the 9th Sikhs very much to the fore. There were handshakings without number, and chaff that was foam and spray from depths that could not be uttered. But they reached their compartment at last; and as Flop was dragged, weeping, from her father's arms, a gong clanged authoritatively; the engine shrieked;—and the train slid out of the station on its three days' journey from Peshawur to the sea.

Then only did the cheering crowd disperse; and the Afridis went back to their hills, quite unaware that, for Sir Theo Desmond, their spontaneous tribute was an imperishable memory—the finest victory he had ever won. And, in honouring the man, they honoured equally the race that breeds such men; confirmed afresh, in their own unique fashion, the unquestioned fact that England holds her supremacy in the East as much by the power of individual character as by the power of the sword.

THE END.

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